Owari no Chronicle Volume4

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AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル②〈下〉

今まで味方であったはずの2nd-Gとの全竜交渉（レヴァイアサンロード）は、佐山と月読の事前交渉により一つの方向性を与えられていく。誰もが過去を忘れないために、そして目を醒ますために……。

かくして、一度は恭順した2nd-Gとの戦闘が開始された。突然、知覚不可能となる“歩法”を使いこなす軍神・鹿島と剣神・熱田。名が力を持つ概念空間の中で、はたして佐山たちは彼らに勝利し、無事、概念核の八叉を封印することができるのか!?

そして、相反する２つの道に対して、佐山が、鹿島が、新庄姉弟が、それぞれ選んだ答えとは!?

「AHEADシリーズ」第２話、完結!!

か-5-19

AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル②〈下〉

川上 稔

電撃文庫
¥
750

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The 1st.AHEAD

かわかみ　みのる
川上　稔

1975年1月3日生まれ、東京出身。とりあえず充電期間を持ちつつ資料整理、の筈が写真類多くて旅日記状態なんですがどうしたものか。ということで、3話目も順調に執筆開始〜。

【電撃文庫作品】

都市シリーズ

パンツァーポリス1935

エアリアルシティ

風水街都　香港〈上〉〈下〉

蠱楽都市OSAKA〈上〉〈下〉

閉鎖都市　巴里〈上〉〈下〉

機甲都市　伯林１〜５

電詞都市DT〈上〉〈下〉

AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル①〈上〉〈下〉

終わりのクロニクル②〈上〉

終わりのクロニクル②〈下〉

イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）

「最近、実家の方で犬を飼う計画が進んでます。既に猫がいるんですが……」ではこのまま動物王国化してみるのはどうか。

カバー／旭印刷

The Ending Chronicle

Act.02

終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

2
【下】

——Gentlemen.
Let’s go then.
In order to see the location of the awakening.

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ボクが答えを怖れぬように

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本文デザイン：TENKY

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元護国課

佐山・薫
養父

ジークフリート
図書館司書

大城・宏昌
技術者

学校関係

大樹先生
担当・顧問

生徒会関係

出雲・覚
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風見・千里
会計

新庄・切
同室

ブレンヒルト
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新庄・運
気になる

ディアナ
独逸UCAT

大城・一夫
困った老人

大城・至
監督

Sf
至の侍女

シビュレ
整備役

ボルドマン
連携役

UCAT関係

Characters

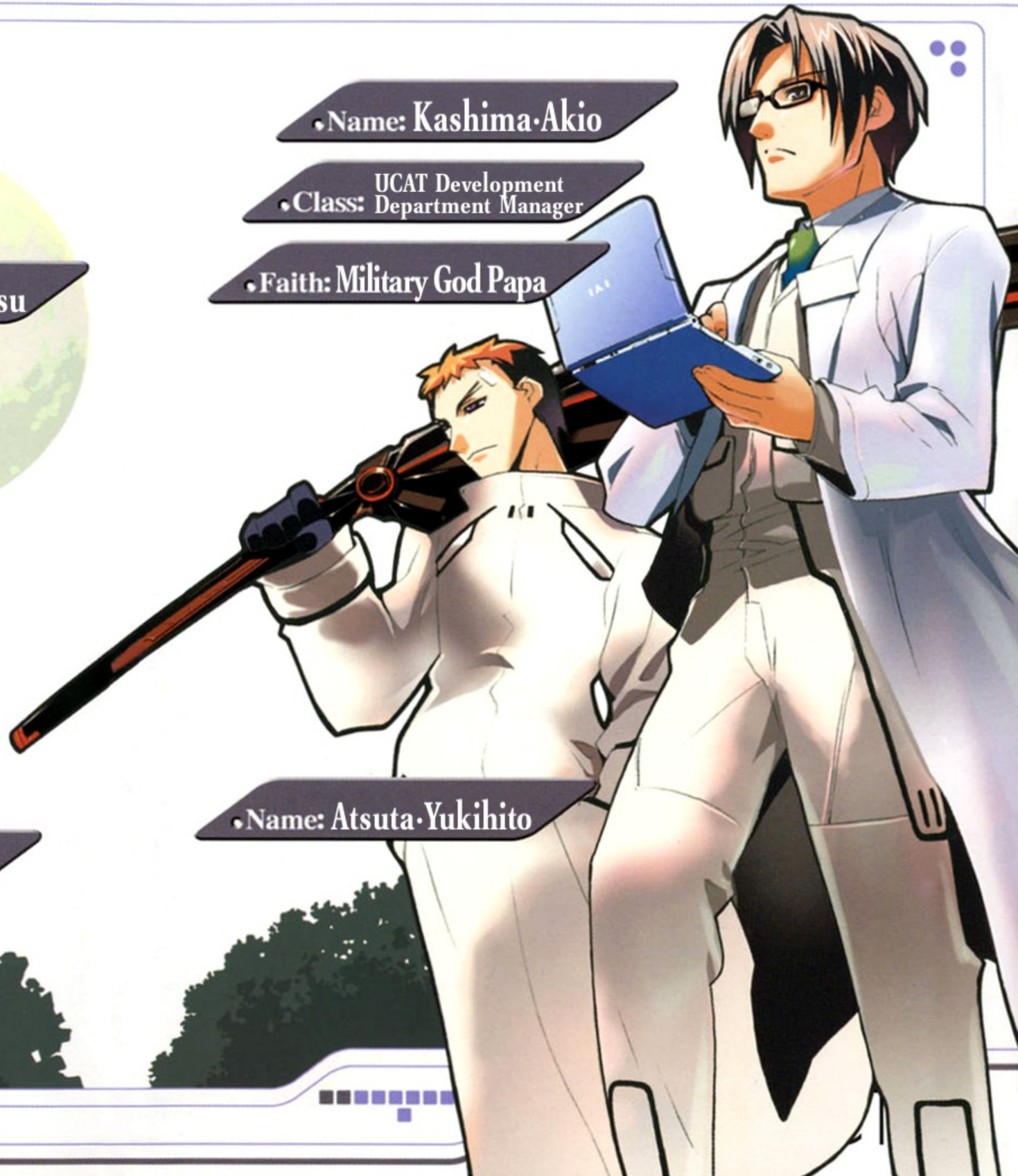
CHARACTER

02

Name: Kashima·Natsu

Class: Normal Person

Faith: Gentle and Reliable Wife



Name: Kashima·Akio

Class: UCAT Development Department Manager

Faith: Military God Papa

Name: Atsuta·Yukihito

Name: Kashima Akio

Class: UCAT Development Department Manager

Faith: Military God Papa

Name: Atsuta Yukihito

Name: Kashima Natsu

Class: Normal Person

Faith: Gentle and Reliable Wife

G-World

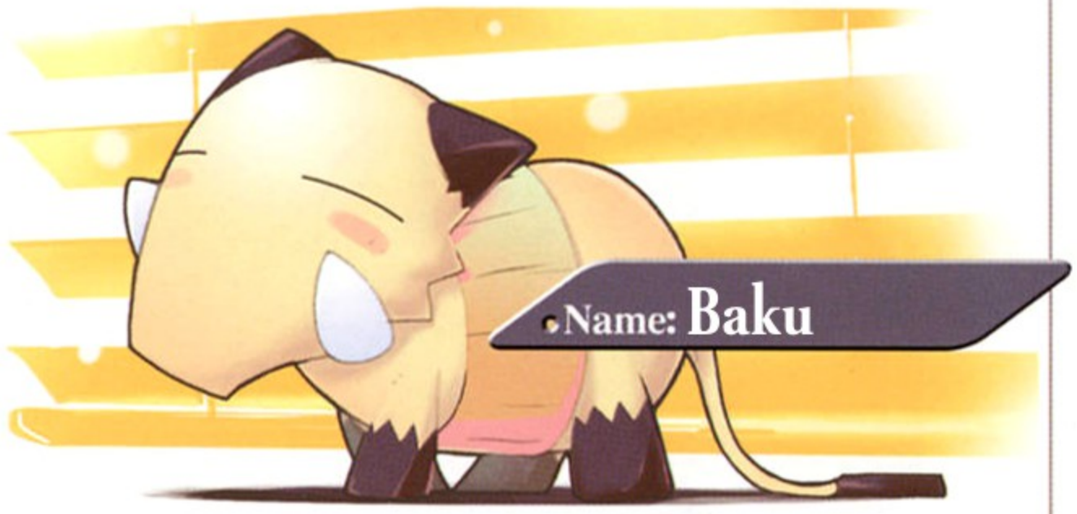
04

In response to this scandal,
IAI replaced most of its leading members
and began working in new industries such as space
development in '97. However, Japanese UCAT was
continually pressed for answers by the other UCATs around
the world, so they did not recover until the late '90s.

Name: Diana·Zonburg

• Concerning IAI's Blank Period •

Strangely, most employee documents from
1985-1995 vanished. The missing documents fall
more heavily on the UCAT side than the IAI side,
but it is unclear if it was done intentionally
or if came about naturally and no guess can
be made as to the reason behind it.



Name: Baku

It seems the blank period began with the great
Kansai earthquake on December 25, 1995.
The earthquake's epicenter was in southeastern Osaka and
it caused M8 levels of damage. When IAI, Japanese UCAT,
and some foreign UCATs rushed in to provide aid,
many of them fell victim to secondary damages.
The common understanding is that the information was
erased to prevent information on UCAT from leaking
out due to what happened, but only
a few members of Japanese
UCAT and other UCATs
know the truth.

03

Concerning IAI's Blank Period

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UCAT was continually pressed for answers by the other UCATs around the world, so they did not recover until the late ’90s.

Name: Baku

Name: Diana Zonburg

Recipe

TODAY'S "QUICK TASTE" —QT OR "CUTIE" FOR SHORT (SORRY.)—
DELICIOUS-SMELLING 'STIR-FRIED SANDLANCE'

Ingredients

- Sandlance.....100 g
- Fried Tofu.....1 Block
- Green Onion.....1/3 Bunch
- Katsuobushi.....1/2 Package
- Sesame Oil.....2 Tbs
- Bonito Sauce.....2 Tbs
- Ground Sesame.....To Taste

"Okay, time for something practical. Sandlance may be written with the characters for 'little girl', but don't get carried away and turn it into some kind of joke, okay?"

"I will ignore that. Anyway, removing the oil from the fried tofu comes first, right? You either boil it or put it in a colander and pour hot water over it. This is really a pain. Can't we just leave the oil in? The cat can handle it."

"You can also warm it a bit on the stove and wring it out with a paper towel. After you chop up the green onion, stir-fry the fried tofu with the sesame oil."

"And then I put in the bonito sauce, right? One tablespoon and then… ah, what a pain. I accidentally dumped way too much in there. But it doesn't matter if the flavor is too strong. The cat can handle it."

"I-I don't like the sound of what you've been saying! Wait! What kind of strange forcible way of stirring is that!? This isn't natto!"

"Very unique, isn't it? Now, once you mix both together in a different pot… Here, kitty."

"Ah, it's a bit bitter, but it's nice. I think I like having a lot of bonito sauce."

"Then I can put all the leftover katsuobushi in. Here, eat mine too."

"Okay. …Wait. Ugh. Wh-what the hell is this!? Just to be absolutely clear, you're a terrible cook!"

"How rude. How can you call this bad…"

"Oh, wow."

"See! You just said 'oh, wow'! …Hm? What are you doing? Waaah!!"

"Oh, dear. How cruel. To make it a little different, you can use chopped bell peppers instead of green onion."

Recipe (For real)

①: Remove the oil from the fried tofu and cut into 2 cm x 5 cm pieces.
②: Cut the white portion of the green onion into round slices and chop the green portion into 2 cm pieces.
③: Put a lot of sesame oil in a pot and stir-fry Step 1.
④: Add a lot of bonito sauce to the pot from Step 3 and thoroughly mix it all together.
⑤: Put the sandlance in a different pot and cook it on medium heat with the remaining sesame oil.
⑥: Add Step 2 and Step 4 to the pot from Step 5 and mix it all together by flipping it in the pot. Once it is cooked, add the rest of the bonito sauce and mix in the katsuobushi. Afterwards, adjust the flavor by adding more bonito sauce.

Today's "Quick Taste" –QT or "Cutie" for short (Sorry)–

Delicious-Smelling Stir-Fried Sandlance

Ingredients

Sandlance – 100 g

Fried Tofu – 1 Block

Green Onion – 1/3 Bunch

Katsuobushi – 1/2 Package

Sesame Oil – 2 Tbs

Bonito Sauce – 2 Tbs

Ground Sesame – To Taste

Natsu: Okay, time for something practical. Sandlance

may be written with the characters for “little girl”, but don’t get carried away and turn it into some kind of joke, okay?

Brunhild: I will ignore that. Anyway, removing the oil from the fried tofu comes first, right? You either boil it or put it in a colander and pour hot water over it. This is really a pain. Can’t we just leave the oil in? The cat can handle it.

Natsu: You can also warm it a bit on the stove and wring it out with a paper towel. After you chop up the green onion, stir-fry the fried tofu with the sesame oil.

Brunhild: And then I put in the bonito sauce, right? One tablespoon and then… ah, what a pain. I accidentally dumped way too much in there. But it doesn ’t matter if the flavor is too strong. The cat can handle it.

Cat: I-I don’t like the sound of what you’ve been saying! Wait! What kind of strange forcible way of stirring is that!? This isn’t natto!

Natsu: Very unique, isn’t it? Now, once you mix both together in a different pot… Here, kitty.

Cat: Ah, it's a bit bitter, but it's nice. I think I like having a lot of bonito sauce.

Brunhild: Then I can put all the leftover katsuobushi in . Here, eat mine too.

Cat: Okay. …Wait. Ugh. Wh-what the hell is this!? Just to be absolutely clear, you're a terrible cook!

Brunhild: How rude. How can you call this bad…

Brunhild: Oh, wow.

Cat: See! You just said "oh, wow"! …Hm? What are you doing? Waaah!!

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Recipe (For real)

1. Remove the oil from the fried tofu and cut into 2 cm x 5 cm pieces.

2. Cut the white portion of the green onion into round slices and chop the green portion into 2 cm pieces.

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4. Add a lot of bonito sauce to the pot from Step 3 and thoroughly mix it all together.

5. Put the sandlance in a different pot and cook it on medium heat with the remaining sesame oil.

6. Add Step 2 and Step 4 to the pot from Step 5 and mix it all together by flipping it in the pot. Once it is cooked, add the rest of the bonito sauce and mix in the katsuobushi. Afterwards, adjust the flavor by adding more bonito sauce.

Chapter 14: Location of the Answer

Chapter 14

“Location of the Answer”

Sing the song of temporary relief
Will that achieve preparation or rest?
All will be known at the conclusion

Sing the song of temporary relief

Will that achieve preparation or rest?

All will be known at the conclusion

A certain 10 square meter room had wooden floors and brown wallpaper.

It was a kitchen.

A skylight on the white roof let in the noontime sun. A sink, stove, and refrigerator sat along the wall. Three people were eating lunch at the table in the center.

Two girls sat on the east side of the table by the entrance. They were named Mikoku and Shino.

An elderly Arab man sat on the west side of the table by the refrigerator. His name was Hajji.

His white scarred left eye was closed and he held a newspaper in his left hand. In this right hand…

"Isn't it a bit early for alcohol, father?" asked Mikoku.

He turned from the glass in his right hand and focused on her.

Mikoku was staring at him while eating pasta with nothing but olive oil on it.

"What is it, Mikoku? This is no different from normal."

Hajji knew what it meant when Mikoku acted differently than normal.

"Do you have a request to make for Shino? You do, don't you? Hm?"

"Nn… You are as sharp as ever. Shino."

"Eh? Oh, okay." Shino had not touched the pasta on the plate in front of her. "U-um, father. I have a request."

"What is it? I will do anything within my power." Hajji then began to think with his hand on the newspaper . "Could you wait a moment? It has been a while since we have had this sort of conversation, so I want to act like a real family by guessing what it is you want. Let's see…"

"Do you know?"

"Yes." Hajji immediately nodded. "Have you fallen in love!? Hm? That's it, isn't it? I'm jealous of this guy. Ha ha ha," he laughed. "I'll burn him at the stake!"

"That is illegal in Japan, father. And Shino would not like that."

"Kwah! You are as cement-like as ever, Mikoku."

It seemed his guess had been wrong, so Hajji hid his mouth with his hand.

"That was a joke. It was just an opening jab, so it doesn't count, okay? This next one will be for real."

"You are not going to guess it, so just hurry up."

Hajji ignored Mikoku and thought for a full minute. However…

…I don't know.

He started to sweat.

…Not good. Think harder.

There had been no problems with food lately.

Shino was handling the shopping herself and she had offered to take turns cooking because Mikoku's cooking only came in three varieties: grilled, boiled, and raw.

Was there anything else?

"…"

Across the table, Mikoku sprinkled soy sauce on her olive pasta.

"I see the former great general of 9th-Gear does not know how to handle household matters. Perhaps that failing comes with the job."

"W-wait, Mikoku. Do not underestimate your father."

"Then give me your answer."

Hajji thought some more. And then…

"Ah."

But that was not it. They had rearranged the bath order only half a month ago.

I have to take this seriously, he thought while setting the newspaper aside.

"I see," he finally said.

"Do you have an answer?"

"No, I have not the slightest clue. …Ow! Wh-what are you doing, Mikoku!?"

"Mikoku, that was the right spot for a tsukkomi, but the salt shaker might have been too painful."

Hajji grabbed the salt shaker before it fell to the floor and sprinkled some salt on his pasta.

Mikoku continued eating indifferently across the table.

"Mikoku, you haven't been communicating with me as much lately."

"Hitting you with things is a faster form of communication than speaking."

"I see," said Hajji with a nod.

The older girl seemed to have entered a rebellious phase recently. He tried to think of a reason.

"Is this because of…what do they call it? Secondary sex characteristics? That must be nice. I remember getting into all sorts of trouble when I obeyed my hormones. Is that what this is? It is, isn't it? Ngah!"

"Sorry, father. It looked like you wanted me to pass the pepper." She then turned to Shino. "Shino, if this continues any longer I will reach the third stage of ' annoyed – pissed – angry'."

"Oh, right. Father, for the sake of peace in our household, I will get right to the point: can we take this afternoon off?"

Hajji stared up at the ceiling while holding the pepper shaker.

…Where did that come from?

The Army made use of a fair number of people and it carried out many different activities. However…

"Lately, everyone has been performing maintenance on Alex in the factory below Takao. And Team Leviathan is heading to the concept space in the Showa Memorial Park today, but there is nothing we can do there. Is that what you mean?"

Hajji nodded at his own question.

They had maintenance to complete, but there was no actual work to be done as the Army. Until Team Leviathan finished their negotiations with 2nd-Gear, there was nothing to do but head out with a small group to make contact with the remnants of other Gears.

"I see," muttered Hajji before nodding again. "Well, one afternoon should be fine."

"Really?"

"I can't say no. I am not a thoughtless enough man to stop the daughters who I gained from the ending of everything. This is a special service as your adoptive father."

"Yay! Thank you so much."

"But try to tell me the night before from now on, hm? Also, make sure to contact the others. Your training with Tatsumi is not just meant to kill time, okay?" said Hajji with a smile.

Shino nodded and gave a smile of her own.

"So what are the two of you going to do today? Hm?" he asked when he saw her smile.

"Mikoku said she wanted to do a bit of shopping, so I thought we could go to a nearby supermarket and I could find some books to read."

Shino turned toward Mikoku and froze up.

At some point, Mikoku had put down her shaker of sesame salt. She now held a casual magazine.

"U-um, Mikoku? Why are you looking at the shopping pages for Harajuku and Shibuya?"

"Because we will be going there today. We need to resupply on the necessities, so there is a lot to buy."

"Wait a second. You said we would only be doing a bit of shopping. Do you have any idea who long it will take

to get from here in Hachiouji to Harajuku and Shibuya? Wait, don't add Shinjuku to the list! How is this 'a bit'!?"

"It is only a distance of thirty kilometers and there are almost no obstacles. This will take little effort." Mikoku turned toward Hajji. "Okay, father. I will escort Shino on her shopping trip."

"Eh? But I want to take it easy at home. And you're clearly making an excuse," complained Shino.

"Do not worry about it. Now, we need to get going. We must find some equipment for you. …I have never been to Harajuku before. I hope they have my size. I am incredibly excited in a composed sort of way."

"…Mikoku. Try not to mix your excuse and your true intentions like that," warned Hajji.

Mikoku raised her smiling face from the magazine.

"How about you come too, father? You can carry our bags. It can be a special service for your adoptive daughters."

Shinjou Setsu sat on the porch of the Tamiya household.

He was sitting in the warm sun while drinking plum tea Kouji had given him. His classmates were preparing for the All Holiday Festival in the yard in front of him.

The students were using their lumber, metal pipes, and other materials to construct a festival stand.

Ooki wandered among them all, but a student with a piece of paper saying “manager” taped to his back followed her around and ensured she caused no harm.

Sayama had left, saying he had student council work to take care of. He had said he was meeting Izumo and Kazami in Tachikawa.

An old man sat next to Setsu.

His name was Hiba Ryuutetsu.

He ran a martial arts dojo named the Hiba Dojo in Okutama and he had been a friend of Sayama’s grandfather.

He was an old man with a crimson left eye.

Shinjou had been speaking with him about Sayama.

"That idiot Mikoto had a rebellious phase back when he entered middle school. He was so cute back then. When you hit him, he would seriously say 'thank you for the lesson'."

"Th-that's some harsh training."

"Not really. I was kind to him. For example, there was when he first came to my dojo. He was a first-timer, so I took him out into the mountains."

"And you trained there?"

"No. I shoved him toward the edge of a cliff. When he really fell off, I panicked and ran home. I trembled in my futon all night expecting the cops to show up. Ha ha ha ha ha."

"That isn't something to laugh about! That's attempted murder!"

"Oh, c'mon." Ryuutetsu scratched at his head. "They say lions throw their cubs into the bottom of ravines,

right? I knew a chance like that would never come again, so I just couldn't resist. I ended up doing it again three or so times afterwards, though."

"Um… I'm going to ignore all the problems with that, but what happened to Sayama-kun?"

"He made it back alive each time and tried to kill me in my sleep. I of course beat him until he couldn't stand afterwards. Then we would eat. I was impressed he could eat a proper meal after all that."

"I think I understand why Sayama-kun is the way he is, but what do you think of him now?"

"He needs to keep growing. He's still no match for us."

"Us?"

"The people who bring pain to him here."

Ryuutetsu placed a hand on the left side of his chest.

Shinjou could see no malice in his crimson eye.

It's so pretty, thought Shinjou. *It looks like a woman's eye.*

Shinjou then realized he had been looking at the eye for too long.

"S-sorry for staring."

"It's fine. Having a young kid like you staring at me is gonna make me blush." Ryuutetsu then gave a bitter smile. "But I want Mikoto to overcome various different things. …You heard that the room in this house where he and his mother lived is never opened, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"That idiot is a lot of trouble for you, isn't he?"

"I'm not sure I would say trouble, but he does a lot of things I don't know what to think about…"

"You don't have to stare blankly into the distance as you say it."

Shinjou smiled bitterly.

"I have always been alone, so it's been fun having Sayama-kun with me. …Not only was I alone long ago, but I was betrayed too."

"Betrayed?"

"I was alone once and no one came for me," answered Shinjou. "The person who was looking after me at the facility said someone would eventually come for me, but they never did. …My memory of crying all alone is still so clear."

"We have a way of remembering the unpleasant things ," said Ryuutetsu with a calm smile.

Shinjou then noticed what might have been a scar above and below the old man's left eyelid. It was hard to tell what exactly it was because of the man's tan.

…He must have something in his past, too.

Shinjou suddenly wondered how much this man would make his chest hurt if thinking of his past affected him the way it did Sayama.

However, that would never happen.

Shinjou took a sip of the plum tea and Ryuutetsu asked him a question.

"How do you feel about yourself now?"

"Oh, I am definitely a bit different now. In the past, I did nothing but wait, but now I feel like waiting is not enough. Still…"

"What is it?"

Shinjou could tell he had lowered his head.

"I came here to help with Sayama-kun's injury, but it's healed now. I have to leave him before long. Staying for no reason would be a bother."

"Have you asked him if it would be a bother?"

"I'm afraid to."

That was why he could only think about the reason he had come in the first place.

Once that reason was gone, he would have to leave.

"I see," said Ryuutetsu. "Well, you should give this some thought. By the way, I saw you hand something to Mikoto before he left. Mind telling me what that was?"

"It was a loose-leaf binder. It contains the story of a novel I hope to write someday."

"A novel? Literature sure is great. A villa in Karuizawa, the highlands, the wide-open sky, and the silent nights…"

"I feel like I heard something similar recently…"

"Hah hah hah! It was from that idiot Mikoto, wasn't it?"

Ryuutetsu laughed and suddenly reached over to rub Shinjou's head.

"Well, keep at it. You seem like the type to put a lot of effort into this."

Sayama, Izumo, and Kazami rode a train to Tachikawa . Izumo and Kazami would normally have used Izumo's motorcycle, but Kazami had wanted to discuss a few mysteries concerning Yamata.

"Sayama, should you really leave when your classmates are working on the stand?"

"The Leviathan Road takes precedence, Kazami. And there is nothing to worry about. This year, Mr. Kim is not the only specialist helping. The Musclekov Brothers from the old Soviet Army will be helping too. From their name , I expect they will be quite strong."

"I get the feeling your class's stand will look like a giant mass of metal."

"Ha ha ha. You can praise us in advance if you like. It bothers me horribly to leave Shinjou-kun behind. He seemed to be in a bad mood. But…"

"But what?" asked Kazami.

Sayama smiled and held up the black binder in his left arm.

"Heh heh. Shinjou-kun gave me his secrets. This has to be full of…ah… I don't think I can resist for much longer! "

"Stop wiggling around like that, you idiot," cut in Izumo. "Didn't you say that's the plot of the novel he plans to write? I doubt it will have anything as exciting as you think."

"Oh? Are you jealous of the trust Shinjou-kun and I have? Then I will give you a single chance, Izumo."

"A chance for what?"

"A once-in-a-lifetime chance to earn my trust. Every morning, climb up to the roof of your dorm building and shout the following to the world below: 'Sayama-sama is #1 in the universe! I dedicate my life to him!' If you keep it up for one hundred days straight… Wait, why are you and Kazami staring out the window together? This is a serious discussion."

"Kaku, don't let him get to you. I can't have you getting any weirder than you already are."

"Don't worry. My tolerance gauge is so full that only surface tension is keeping it from spilling over. Nothing more will fit."

"That sounds like a difficult situation," commented Sayama.

"Whose fault do you think it is!?"

At any rate, they continued the conversation.

Kazami stated the following mysteries:

1. Yamata's name did not refer to his job or position in society.

2. Susanoo's name did not change even after being restored to his original position.

3. Some mystery surrounded Kusanagi as well.

Their meeting in the train would last for the 15 minutes until they arrived at the Showa Memorial Park.

As they began the discussion, Kazami confidently gave her opinion.

"I was thinking about Yamata's question that Sayama heard in his dream. It's just a guess, but I think he might be asking for his name."

In the design room on UCAT's second basement, Kashima looked up from his laptop.

He realized the room was deserted.

"Oh, everyone has left for the Showa Memorial Park," he muttered to himself.

While noticing how quiet it was, he looked at the top of his desk.

A single cardkey sat there.

It was the cardkey to the 3rd Production Room that Tsukuyomi had given him.

"What I abandoned still waits in there."

…How do I even feel about that anymore?

Kashima suddenly stood up in order to cut off his thoughts.

He stared at the cardkey on his desk and had a single thought.

…The Leviathan Road.

He then spoke the words that followed his uncertain thoughts.

"That boy named Sayama should begin the preliminary negotiations with Director Tsukuyomi before long. If they are truly trying to learn about 2nd-Gear, they should realize what Yamata's question is soon."

Kashima placed a hand on the cardkey.

"What is Yamata's true name?"

On the train, Izumo tilted his head in response to what Kazami had said.

"Yamata's name? Isn't it Yamata?"

"Weren't you listening? Why does the serpent that swallowed the divine sword of Kusanagi not have a name that reflects that role? I think that applies to 2nd-Gear's Yamata as well. Why was the system controlling 2nd-Gear's biosphere given the name Yamata ?"

Sayama's eyebrows moved a bit when he heard that. He still held Shinjou's binder.

"Before, you said your name changes when your role changes. And 2nd-Gear's control system lost control and became a flame dragon. So are you saying that transformation caused it to lose its old name and gain the name of the burning flame dragon Yamata?"

"Yes. From that perspective, you can see why Yamata held a grudge against the residents of 2nd-Gear and could not trust them, can't you? The people of 2nd-Gear caused him to lose his original name, so he asks them what he originally was. In other words, he is asking them to speak the name of the world that that was destroyed when they forgot it."

"So it's a grudge on the level of an entire world? That's no joke."

"But in that case, Yamata's name is a simple matter," said Sayama.

Kazami and Izumo looked a bit surprised.

Seeing that, Sayama took a satisfied breath and brushed up his hair with his left hand.

"Heh. If you come crying to me and beg, I might just tell you."

"Heh heh. Sayama? Did you know divine punishment can strike people even on trains?"

"Now, as a special service, I will tell you. Basically, Yamata is the result of something proper falling to the side of evil. Think of what Susanoo did as cutting away the evil with Totsuka and producing its proper form from within."

"You mean Yamata's name is Kusanagi? And the name Yamata referred to the outer form hiding it?"

Kazami looked both surprised and happy, but Sayama spoke up again.

"It is too soon to relax."

Kazami turned a concerned look toward him.

"Eh? Wh-why?"

"Kazami, there is still your final mystery concerning Kusanagi. Listen carefully. Kusanagi has two names.

Once it was presented to the heavens, its name changed to Ama-no-Murakumo. The name Kusanagi can be seen to refer to a cool breeze blowing through the grass, so Murakumo could refer to the wind that brings in the rain .”

“Wait, wait, wait. Then which one is the sword’s real name?”

“I do not know, but that is the true question we are being asked. That will determine whether we are viewing 2nd-Gear properly or not.”

“You mean everything’s riding on whether we choose Kusanagi or Murakumo?”

“A man named Ooshiro Hiromasa once gave the correct answer and died. We should probably research him a bit. We need to know why he was so attached to his answer that he was willing to risk his life on it.” Sayama frowned. “But I know the answer to another of your mysteries, Kazami. I know why Susanoo’s name did not change.”

“Eh?”

Kazami tilted her head and Sayama gave a satisfied expression.

"The name Susanoo may also refer to the hero who presented Kusanagi to the heavens. Both the name Kusanagi and the name Murakumo are related to the wind, so he had the name of the king of storms. Whether you render it as Susanoo or Susaou, the name of the wind king would not change when he acquires a sword of the wind."

"Hm. But that doesn't help us decide whether Kusanagi's real name is Kusanagi or Murakumo," said Kazami while forcing a stiff smile. "We'll find the right answer, won't we?"

"Do not worry. I intend to face everything and find the answer. I am invincible, you know?"

"While you may be #1 in the universe in some ways, what proof do you have that you're invincible?" asked Izumo.

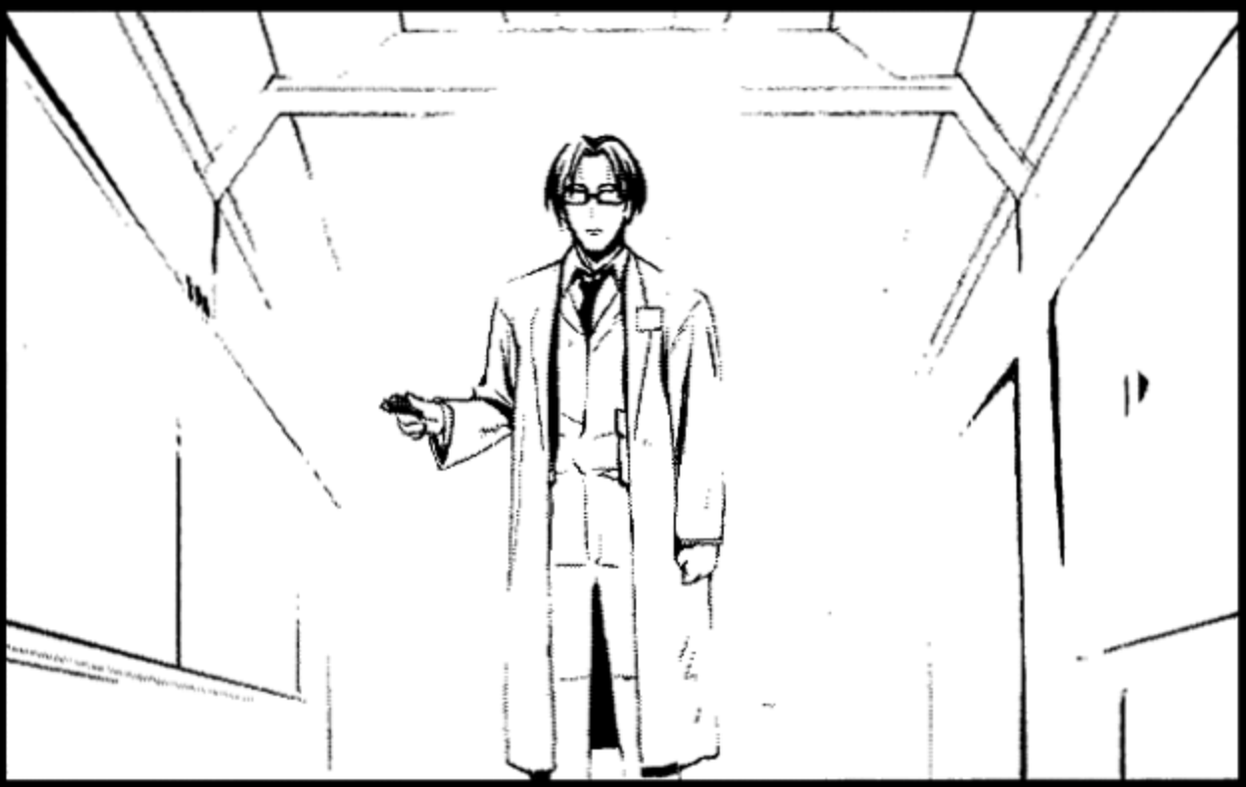
Sayama replied while watching their train stop at its destination.

"There is no such thing as having proof of invincibility . But I am invincible, so you two can rest easy even without proof."

Chapter 15: Point of Acquisition

Chapter 15

“Point of Acquisition”



Look back
Look back
And remember so you never need to look back again

Look back

Look back

And remember so you never need to look back again

Kashima stood in the passageway behind the design room that led to the production rooms.

He wore his usual work uniform and lab coat and he held the cardkey Tsukuyomi had given him.

"What am I supposed to do? Director Tsukuyomi told me to face this, but…"

What will that teach me? he wondered.

His heart was feeling restless and he looked forward in order to fill the hole he felt there.

In the past, he had often used that white walled passageway, but now he only occasionally passed by its entrance.

…The newcomers probably think I'm a useless guy who loiters around the entrance.

That was not inaccurate.

His job was to perform the final modifications, but the newcomers seemed to think he was stealing their final job.

A few of those newcomers avoided speaking to him.

The Kashima family had a history with the sword god and swordsmith god families such as Katori or Mikami.

"The military gods of Kashima ended up forging the swords that those families were meant to forge."

He had heard about it from his grandfather.

As the Concept War had continued, the military gods of 2nd-Gear had started forging their own swords because they had experienced the battles for themselves.

…The original smithing gods ended up forging small tools and daily items instead.

"But the situation has reversed these days."

Kashima gave a bitter smile toward the floor and then faced forward.

The 1st Production Room was on the right side of the passageway and the 2nd was on the left a bit further down.

What mattered was the room past the corner and at the very end.

That was an area which had existed since the days of the National Defense Department.

…The 3rd Production Room.

"I used to use that room constantly, but now it is used by no one."

Kashima nodded and began to walk.

After a dozen or so seconds, he passed by the 1st Production Room.

After a similar amount of time, he passed by the explosion-resistant door of the 2nd Production Room.

The passageway turned to the right and the 3rd Production Room was about 100 meters further down.

"…"

Kashima walked.

…I sure am calm.

His pace was steady and his grip on the cardkey in his right hand was relaxed.

…Is this all?

No hint of trembling could be heard in his footsteps and they were not too loud. He tried to move his shoulders and had no difficulty.

He felt an odd sense of loss in his body. He felt himself being cut free of something as if he was announcing that the past was only the past.

He approached the corner.

He turned right.

He focused on his actions again, but his pace was still steady and he was still looking forward.

The white explosion-resistant door of the 3rd Production Room was about 100 meters away.

The thick double door looked as white as the day it had been made.

And that was all.

"…"

Kashima touched the left side of his chest just as he had seen that boy named Sayama do in the cafeteria.

Everything was normal. His pulse was not racing and he felt no pain.

…Why am I so calm?

For some reason, the accident from eight years ago felt like a long gone event.

He recalled the sensation of the rain, of the mud, and of Natsu's hand.

…They all feel so distant.

He wondered why. This was completely different from what he had expected.

He had thought trying to remember would cause him to relive the past in real time.

"But the past is nothing but the past," he muttered with a sigh.

He relaxed his body once more, faced forward, and began walking.

…At this rate, I'm going to have to reassess myself.

Kashima predicted he would be able to walk up and open the 3rd Production Room as if it meant nothing to him. Then he could pick up the two pieces of Futsuno's broken frame.

"I need to do something about it."

Given his current calm, his options were limitless.

He could smash it on the spot and dump it down the garbage chute. He could reforge it, deliver it to Atsuta, and receive his friend's thanks. However…

"Either way, I might quit UCAT."

If his connection to the past was gone, he would no longer need to feel guilty concerning Natsu.

…I will be able to be an even better husband to her.

He was now only twenty meters from the door.

He continued walking while thinking about what was to come.

He thought about what he would do once he no longer had to worry about the past.

…I might be able to help with Natsu-san's rehabilitation. She might recover to the point that her left hand and the rain no longer bother her.

Perhaps that was being arrogant, but this burst of confidence showed just how much the past had been bothering him.

But now the past was just the past.

He had feared it so much, but now that he was facing it and approaching it, it was nothing.

“I feel so stupid for avoiding it for so long.”

Kashima faced forward once more.

He had not moved a single step closer to the 3rd Production Room’s door.

Atsuta arrived at the back entrance to the Tamiya household on his motorcycle.

The back entrance was a small wooden gate. Atsuta was greeted by a young man in a suit. It was Kouji.

Kouji folded his arms while the slight afternoon wind washed over him.

“Long time no see. What brings you to the back entrance of our house?”

"You're as stubborn as ever, Kouji. What's going on out front anyway? It's so loud I didn't want to get anywhere near it."

"The same thing you and my sister did back in your school days: preparations for the All Holiday Festival."

"Oh, the festival. Ryouko was the student council president, so the festivals were pretty crazy back in our day. We didn't make any preparations at your place, though"

"I knew how destructive your singing is, so I did everything I could via our parents to keep that from happening."

"Y'know, you're pretty damn rude."

Kouji ignored him, sighed, and changed the subject.

"Anyway, my sister is currently out."

"With Sayama?"

Kouji immediately reacted to that name.

His body moved ever so slightly and Atsuta's right arm shot up.

An object suddenly appeared between Atsuta's index and middle fingers.

"A sashimi knife? You're about 0.2 seconds faster than before. Toh!"

Atsuta's final shout came as he jumped down in front of his motorcycle. He kept his hands on the handlebars and performed a flip. At the same time, Kouji's left hand sent a kitchen knife through the air in a backhand swing.

"You have more techniques than the last time I saw you, Atsuta-san."

Kouji faced Atsuta's back as the other man landed.

Immediately afterwards, Kouji swung both arms and threw two kitchen knives at the exact same moment.

But Atsuta did not even turn around.

"If I couldn't do this much, I wouldn't be able to protect Ryouko!"

Atsuta swung the sashimi knife he had caught.

That produced two metallic noises.

As he slowly turned around, two knives broken at the center lay at his feet.

He faced forward and saw Kouji standing next to the motorcycle and holding a new knife in a backhanded grip.

“Atsuta-san, where did you hear about the young master?”

“Ryouko mentioned him last night.”

“And what is your relationship with the young master ?”

“Like I’d tell you.”

“Then please leave. And please do nothing which would harm the young master.”

“C’mon, Kouji. Are you really gonna say that to me? You know you’re no match for me. In the same way, I know only you can handle Ryouko's problematic side.”

"I am aware I am no match for you." Kouji gestured toward the motorcycle next to him. "Which is why I will instead do things to this motorcycle that will make you cry."

"That will make me cry?"

"Yes. First, I will use this knife to write 'real Yankees never die' on it. Later, I will periodically use my family's information network to locate the motorcycle wherever it may be and carve new statements into it."

"Please stop. In fact, when did you get so cunning?"

"Anyone would after constantly being caught up in the trouble my sister causes."

Kouji stared off into the blue sky and Atsuta sighed.

"Don't say that," said Atsuta while recalling the past. " She helped me out quite a lot. She'd go apologize to the families of the people I punched and she'd bring me a lunch when I had no money."

"I see. For some reason, my memories of my middle school days involve being lectured with my sister at strange houses and being forced up at the crack of dawn

to make two lunches for her. I suppose it is important to view everything in a positive light."

"You got a problem? Why do you keep staring off into the distance?"

"At any rate, please leave. What is with today, anyway ? You never act for anyone but yourself. Are you having some trouble with a friend?"

Atsuta smiled bitterly, climbed back onto the motorcycle, and removed the kickstand.

"That's right. A friend of mine is having some trouble. He doesn't seem to know who he is."

Kashima gulped as he stared at the thick door.

He had not moved even a step closer to the white metal door since the last time he had looked at it.

He looked down and could see he was standing. His legs were not trembling. He could feel the floor beneath his feet and he could sense his waist and abdomen being supported by his legs.

But despite thinking he was walking, Kashima had not moved a single step since arriving twenty meters from the door.

"I was standing still while convincing myself I was moving forward."

He checked his left arm to see if any concept was in effect, but the black wristwatch had not reacted since entering the design room.

What was happening?

…I can't move forward.

The feeling welling up in his heart seemed to slide up his spine.

He was not sure how to describe the sensation or the emotions it gave him. His desire to deny it formed words .

"My inability to face the past has reached a subconscious level."

He did not feel any fear, but he could not approach that place.

He faced that explosion-resistant door while wondering why.

A few colored metal plates were attached to the wall next to the sealed white metal of the door.

Those metal plates were engraved with the surnames of the past managers of that production room.

The leftmost plate contained the name Kashima.

However, his own name was not what he focused on now.

He started with the earliest name. That name belonged to the very first manager of the 3rd Production Room.

“Ooshiro Hiromasa.”

Next to that name was the name of the second manager.

“Kashima.”

This time, Kashima was not written in kanji. Kashima’s grandfather had refused to write it that way because he

opposed fully naturalizing himself even if he had abandoned his old surname of Takemikazuchi.

Kashima finally began to tremble when he saw those two names.

He felt an extra strong beat of his heart. He did not know what to call it.

He knew nothing of his grandfather or Ooshiro Hiromasa.

Nevertheless, those two names were there. His own name was listed far to the left.

…How can this be?

Carved into that steel were names from the past and the name of the one who was to inherit the past.

Only someone who was the same as those in the past could arrive here.

Kashima recalled the past. He recalled that day nine years ago.

He had finally managed to see that giant humanoid weapon, but the bridge in the head had been mostly destroyed.

…My grandfather's dying request to go to Susaou became meaningless.

He had focused solely on demonstrating his power in the 3rd Production Room so that he could pursue his grandfather.

As he did nothing but pursue his own power, he had forgotten all about the girl he had grown close to in his college days.

"What happened to me after that?"

He suddenly heard a certain noise.

It was the sound of rain.

…It can't be.

He was underground. There was no way he could be hearing that.

But he was undoubtedly hearing rain.

He had gained something on that rainy night when the earth had collapsed.

What had it been? How had he acquired it?

He absentmindedly raised his left hand up in front of his face. He did so ever so slowly.

But he could not fully raise it. It stopped while positioned diagonally down.

It looked like he was holding his hand out to someone.

…To who?

"Stop."

…Don't think back. Don't think back to what you reached for and what you gained.

He had thought he had carved it into his heart, but he had actually avoided touching it and simply deceived himself.

…Don't look straight at it.

But his left hand was definitely grasping something in the empty air.

He was grasping the hand of someone he cared for. He could feel the missing fingers and the warm wetness.

"…!"

Just as before, Kashima let out an enraged cry.

He clenched his hand which was covered in phantom warmth and heat. He faced forward.

He only recognized three of the names: the two rightmost names and his own name on the left.

"Why…?"

Why had he wanted to have his name engraved there?

Back then, I viewed it as my pledge to pursue the past, thought Kashima. *Please… Please let it be a lie.*

He wanted to erase the fact that he had ever wanted that.

Otherwise, everything he had now would become a lie .

Natsu, Harumi, their house, the flowers in the garden, his parents' concerns, their own concerns…all of it.

But all he felt in his hand were missing fingers and wet blood.

"That is the truth," proclaimed the letters in that steel. "Everything you have gained is nothing but a lie used to escape from us."

Kashima distinctly recalled the feeling of creating Futsuno.

…I felt such superiority.

He had felt joy, but that joy had frozen over in an instant when he heard the scream.

He trembled as he recalled the emotions he had felt.

"Please," he muttered.

…I don't need any of that anymore.

"Please rid me of this name…"

His trembling voice received no response. The engraved names sent him nothing but silence.

Those names would not move from the past.

That truth caused him to instinctually move back. He took a step back and immediately followed it with another.

"Ah," he said quietly as he turned his back on those names. "Ahh…"

He tripped and almost fell as he began to run. There was nothing he could do to stop himself. He finally realized his entire body was trembling.

…*Run.*

"Ahh…"

He felt as if the door behind him had opened and some unknown presence had come from within.

It was already right behind him. The names of the past and the names of the present were trying to swallow him up.

Is this what I abandoned? he thought again.

"…!"

Kashima ran. After taking a few steps, he realized he still held the cardkey in his right hand. He threw it behind him.

He did the same with everything he thought would get in the way of his escape: the pen in his lab coat pocket , his calculator, his handkerchief, the lab coat itself, and the glasses on his face. He threw them all at the presence pursuing him.

But the past would not leave him. That feeling that caused him to tremble refused to let go.

He felt as if it would never let go again.

He swallowed a scream and continued to run.

…I have Natsu-san and Harumi now.

He turned the corner and ran out into the empty design room without looking back.

…So why won't my power leave me?

"Okay. How should we handle this?"

A woman in a lab coat stood beneath the clear sky.

It was Tsukuyomi.

She was inside the 2nd-Gear concept space containing Susaou. She was in the small open area next to Susaou's lake.

Other than the lake to the north, she was surrounded by forest.

With the rotting pier extending toward Susaou to her back, she stood in the cool wind with her arms folded and a slight smile on her lips.

She faced a boy wearing a suit. He was Sayama Mikoto .

She used her smile to welcome him and slowly began to speak.

“Sayama Mikoto-kun, are you alone?”

“Yes. The others do not like negotiations, so they are investigating the area. How about you?”

“I’m alone, too. Kashima had to gather his thoughts a bit, so he won’t be coming. I, Director Tsukuyomi Shizuru of the development department, will handle the preliminary negotiations in his place.”

“So you will be my opponent, is that it?”

“Yes.”

She nodded just before her expression changed.

Someone had exited the forest behind the boy.

The person wore an orange jacket and a white dress.

She was out of breath and Sayama turned toward her.

“Shinjou-kun,” he said.

"Yes," replied Shinjou Sadame upon having her name called. She looked at him and then Tsukuyomi before giving an exhausted smile. "Sorry I'm late. This is the preliminary negotiations, right?"

Chapter 16: Unmoving Predecessor

Chapter 16

“Unmoving Predecessor”

What is it that was once gained?
It is the source of the storm-bringing wind
It is the place from which all stormy paths leave

What is it that was once gained?

It is the source of the storm-bringing wind

It is the place from which all stormy paths leave

Below the blue sky and surrounded by forest, a certain object existed in the center of a lake with a radius of nearly a kilometer.

It was the giant humanoid machine named Susaou. That giant mass of metal was covered in black armor and burnt rust.

It existed within a concept space which had been created back when the Showa Memorial Park was an airfield.

Susaou existed in the very center of the space. Its giant body appeared to be made from connected warships and its waist was lowered slightly. Its two long arms were held up in front of its face.

The area around the lake below Susaou was filled with the color green.

There was a forest, a grassy field, a river, and the lake. The lake maintained its form without overflowing because the surrounding dirt and plants were carrying out their proper function.

Currently, a small commotion was occurring in the concept space's forest.

"Wah! I'm floating!"

The voice belonged to Kazami.

She was floating four or five meters above a small clearing in the forest.

Sibyl was running around in a panic below. She stretched her arms up and jumped.

"Chisato-samaaa! Please come dowwwwn!"

"I-I can't control it! This is due to 2nd-Gear's concepts, isn't it!?"

Kazami flailed her arms and legs through the air, but she did nothing but float.

When they had entered the concept space, they had all heard the following words:

—Names provide power.

This concept was displaying itself with the character for “wind” in Kazami’s name.

“I felt my body get lighter and lighter and next thing I knew I was up here! What should I do, Sibyl?”

“Chisato-sama, please try harder. Go like this: hoo hoo !”

“Wow, that gesture is so cute, Sibyl!”

“I-I am telling you to do this. What if you never return to the ground?”

“Y-you’re right. Without me around, who will protect the peace of Taka-Akita Academy from those two idiots? ”

"Hey, what're you two doing?" Izumo appeared from the forest and scratched at his head. "Stop making so much noise while I'm trying to get a nap for our investigation."

"What kind of nonsense is that? …Anyway, what am I supposed to do?"

"Hm?"

Izumo looked confused and approached Kazami.

"No, wait, Kaku! There's wind blowing from you! Wind!"

"Oh, yeah. The name Izumo means 'from the clouds', so I guess it would produce wind. That would be why things were so cool as I slept."

"Ahhh, Chisato-sama is blowing away to the west!"

"Fine then," muttered Izumo as he ran after her.

He overtook his own wind and made his way below Kazami.

The direction of the wind affecting her changed. The wind was radiating from him in every direction, so the wind blew up at her from below.

She flailed around a bit more and somehow managed to come to a stop in midair.

"Thank goodness. I was about to be blown outside the concept space like a drifting jellyfish."

"This is a pain-in-the-ass world to deal with. …But it's not all bad."

"What's so great about it?"

Kazami looked down at Izumo and found him looking happily up at her.

"White…"

"Why are you peeking up my skirt!? You already get to see these all the time!"

"Don't be stupid. The panties you see all the time and the ones you can peek at now are completely different. A guy is always up for a nice peek!"

"Are you completely shameless? Ahh, and I can't reach you!"

As Izumo nodded happily, Kazumi rotated forwards overhead as she held down the hem of her tight skirt.

At the same time, she suddenly lost all buoyancy.

"Eh?"

With that tone of confusion, Kazami fell straight down.

"Wah! Ow ow ow ow!"

"Ah! Ch-Chisato-sama's knee struck the side of Izumo-sama's head as if she aimed it!"

Kazami stood up and looked down at Izumo.

He was sprawled out on the ground with an oddly happy look on his unconscious face, so she decided everything had turned out all right.

"A-are you okay?" asked Sibyl worriedly.

"He's fine. I have no real proof, though."

"Yes, I know that he is fine. I have no real proof either, though. But what about you?"

"Hmm. I feel like there was a slight problem with that conversation… At any rate, I'm fine. And more importantly, why do you think I fell like that?"

"I assume your weight must have suddenly incre-… Ahem. I misspoke, so please stop giving me that sad look . I am well aware of the effort you are putting into your diet."

"Well, I was thinking of losing some weight because I went too far with my school band uniform… But don't say that kind of thing. It makes me wonder if it's true for an instant and it gives me a stomachache."

"A-anyway, let us get back on topic. It happened as soon as you faced the ground," pointed out Sibyl.

Kazami tilted her head and then nodded to drive out the thoughts of her weight.

"But it wasn't just looking down that made me fall. There has to be another condition."

She thought for a bit and finally found the answer.

"I saw the wind."

"Eh?"

As Sibyl looked confused, Kazami thought about her own family name.

"Wait, Chisato-sama! You are beginning to float again. "

"Don't worry. I'll come right back down this time," said Kazami as she descended to the ground.

She smiled at Sibyl who grabbed her hand. Instead of telling her to relax, she explained.

"We weren't thinking about my name well enough. We were focusing on the character for 'wind' so much we forgot about the character for 'see'. That must be why I was blown away by the wind." She took a breath. "The name Kazami originally referred to someone who could read the wind, so I suddenly gained the power to read the wind when I faced Kaku's wind. I was no longer being blown by the wind; I was facing the wind."

Kazami looked up into the sky.

She could see Susaou towering above as well as a few people in lab coats walking through the sky.

They were from 2nd-Gear. Most of the development department had come to investigate Susaou.

"They can use this power much better than us. I wonder what will happen in this Leviathan Road."

"Director Tsukuyomi should begin the preliminary negotiations with Sayama-sama soon."

"That's right."

Kazami nodded and looked down.

Izumo remained collapsed on the ground, but he had come to and was looking up at her.

"This is nice, Chisato. You don't often get a look from a crazy angle like-…gwoh!"

The sounds coming from Izumo reverberated through that 2nd-Gear space.

Three figures stood in the field in front of Susaou.

They were Sayama, Shinjou, and Tsukuyomi.

They were the only ones in that field. As they faced each other, Sayama started by taking a breath.

This was not a sigh of discouragement or relief. It was an expectant and calming breath taken before starting something.

He looked directly at Tsukuyomi. He had a single thing he had to say, so he nodded toward her.

…It is time we began the preliminary negotiations.

"Will I be able to get along with this old hag?" he said as he brushed his hair up into the warm wind.

Shinjou gave him a panicked look and her mouth wordlessly flapped opened and closed.

He decided to look back at what he had said and he folded his arms in thought with Baku on his head.

"Oh, it seems I spoke my true thoughts out loud and thought what I intended to say. They say your body will take control during extreme situations, so that must be what happened here."

"I don't really care, but aren't you going to apologize for that rude comment?"

"Th-that's right, Sayama-kun! Even if it's true, you can't say it!"

"Aren't you going to apologize for that rude comment?"

This time, Shinjou was forced to look back at what she had said.

Sayama hid Shinjou behind him and bowed toward Tsukuyomi.

"It appears we have made inappropriate comments."

"Oh, are you apologizing? Even though the preliminary negotiations are only just beginning?"

"Yes. But, Director Tsukuyomi, you need not worry about your age. Reality is always cruel. Say goodbye to your ideals and say hello to reality. …Now, let us begin the preliminary negotiations for the Leviathan Road."

"…"

Tsukuyomi fell silent and sighed.

"Fine, but what do you hope to accomplish here?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't act like you don't know."

He did know, but knowledge was different from hearing your opponent say it.

"I want to hear it from you," he said.

Tsukuyomi gave a resigned smile.

"Kashima told you back in the cafeteria. 2nd-Gear has nothing to demand from UCAT. We aren't the same as Fasolt from 1st-Gear."

Tsukuyomi looked around at the city back in the real world visible beyond the field and forest.

"We are satisfied with this world. We see no reason to make waves and damage our relationship with you. Rather than get hung up over pride, we prefer to receive the benefits of this world."

"I see."

"After Yamata was sealed, the people of 2nd-Gear became fully naturalized. It seems the remaining

opposition at the time was persuaded by the Kashima who created Totsuka."

"That would be Kashima Akio-san's grandfather, correct? He was the second in command aboard Susaou."

"Yes. He changed his surname from Takemikazuchi to Kashima, but he refused to spell Kashima with kanji."

Shinjou tilted her head and took a half-step forward.

"Why did he do that?"

"From what I hear, he was a complicated man. For example, he apparently never got along with Ooshiro Hiromasa who led the construction of Susaou."

"Never got along?"

They had both been engineers and they had needed to work together to seal Yamata.

Sayama found this odd, but he kept the question in his heart.

That Kashima was from the past and he had to focus on the preliminary negotiations.

"That Kashima is gone. You were saying everyone from 2nd-Gear was convinced to naturalize, correct?'

"Yes. If there is anything 2nd-Gear has to ask of Low-Gear, it is to maintain the status quo. That is what we want from Low-Gear."

"I see. The status quo, is it? That is a simple demand."

Sayama smiled, nodded, and gently gave his answer.

"I reject that demand."

The afternoon sun illuminated a farmhouse within a forest.

The large farmhouse was located next to a multi-leveled paddy field. The wooden house had a thatch roof and the veranda was darkened.

A single white figure sat on that veranda.

It was Kashima wearing his normal outfit.

His shoulders were lowered and he sat as if trying to shrink down. Behind him was a large old-fashioned Japanese-style living room with a tatami mat floor.

However, he was not looking into the house.

Without wearing his glasses, he was looking toward the paddies which reflected the afternoon sun and sky.

The multi-level paddies were surrounded by mountains and forests and they were still filled with water waiting for the rice to be planted.

“Back home…”

“Why are you saying that like you only just realized where you are?” asked a female voice.

He turned around toward the living room and found an elderly woman wearing Japanese clothes and a white apron.

She carried tea on a tray and Kashima took a teacup and drank some. He looked toward the woman’s gray hair.

"Mom, where is dad?"

"Reading the newspaper while putting up a fight in the bathroom. He said something about suffering as he gives birth."

"I already finished that, you fool. It was a difficult birth."

An elderly man wearing a T-shirt and shorts entered.

He walked up and sat next to Kashima.

Kashima's father let out a groan as he settled down and looked annoyed as he asked a question.

"Well? What is it? Did you have a fight with Na-chan? What had you running here while half in tears?"

"I wasn't crying."

"Then what put that look on your face?" he asked as if it was a bother.

Kashima thought for a moment and wondered if this was too sudden.

"What would you say if I told you I was quitting my job at UCAT?"

"I see." Kashima's father leaned forward as if in a large nod. "I don't think that's a good thing."

With a thoughtful expression, he held his thumb and forefinger a tiny distance apart.

"It's this bad a thing. …But what would you do if you quit?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet, so I can't really say."

"Then why are you here? We aren't planting the rice until three days from now."

"If I did that kind of hard work, I wouldn't be able to move tomorrow. I just wanted to ask a few questions today."

He then asked what he considered important.

"How did my grandfather face his power? What about his comrades? Do you know? How did they decide whether they should use their power or abandon it?"

"Why do you want to know that?"

"It's related to my job, so I can't say. But…it's what I want to know right now."

His father's confused look made him hesitate for a moment, but he still said it.

"I need to decide what I should do about my power."

"I see. In that case, Aki, I know how you can find out."

His father gave an understanding nod and reached forward.

Kashima looked at his father's hand.

"…"

After a moment, he gulped.

In his father's hand before his eyes was a drawn Japanese sword.

"It's simple, Aki. If your thoughts are enough to leave you conflicted and willing to rely on your ancestors, then use them to defeat this powerful right arm and this

decoration from the living room. Today is Saturday. Saturday night is a time for fever, right?"

The old man smiled and suddenly swung the sword toward his son.

"You reject it?" repeated Tsukuyomi.

Sayama remained silent and did not even nod.

It was obvious from Shinjou's face that this was a surprise to her as well.

The way she gasped and looked at him was not an act.

He had some reason for rejecting the request, so Tsukuyomi asked about it.

"Why? Is there something wrong with us wishing for things to remain as they are?"

"There is," he decisively stated.

He remained expressionless and his voice contained no emotion.

"First, I would like to hear what you have to offer us," he asked quietly.

That is a dangerous question, thought Tsukuyomi.

She chose her words carefully and gave her answer with caution filling her gut.

"Two things. First, we will tell you Yamata's question and answer. Second, we will release Yamata, and Kashima will answer the question for you."

"I see," said Sayama. His voice contained a hint of a smile. "You can only offer us half of that." He took a breath. "After all, we have already arrived at Yamata's question and answer on our own. You need not give it to us. If we make the deal now, you will only receive half of the status quo you want. Is that okay with you?"

Hearing that, Tsukuyomi realized something.

…A villain, hm?

It was said the surname Sayama indicated a villain.

Did his surname help him function as a villain in the 2nd-Gear concept space?

That sudden thought led her to an answer which she spoke aloud.

"Are you saying you have no problem with causing waves between us?"

"Do not be so suspicious. I am merely verifying what you have to offer," said Sayama expressionlessly. " Maintaining the status quo. That is quite a convenient phrase. It makes it sound like most anything can be resolved peacefully. But it is just another way of saying you could not think of anything else."

"And? What else could we need?"

"If you truly think that, then let me say this: you fool."

The boy's final word caused Tsukuyomi to frown.

"Let me say it again: you fool. And let me say it a third time: you fool. If you have not realized-…"

"Stop this," said Tsukuyomi while realizing how dangerous the annoyance she was feeling was. "Do you think you can provoke us into being enemies by repeatedly calling us fools?"

"This is why I am calling you a fool, Director Tsukuyomi. Are you going to give any thought to what exactly is making me call you a fool?" Sayama looked to the ground with a bitter smile. "Let me ask you this: if you truly wish to maintain the status quo, why is one of your people conflicted over his own power?"

Tsukuyomi recalled a certain man. He was the conflicted one Sayama referred to.

…That is the man I chose to be 2nd-Gear's representative.

Sayama seemed to realize what she was thinking and he asked another question.

"You are willing to cast aside those like him and continue to seek the status quo. Could you not judge that as foolish?"

I see, she thought in silent comprehension. *He did his research and gave it proper thought.*

2nd-Gear's problem was not a simple one.

If they had adapted to Low-Gear and lost their individuality, they would have no choice but to fit in.

But even though they had intended to lose their individuality, their power remained.

When those of 2nd-Gear learned of their Gear and came into contact with their concepts, they learned of the power held within their names. They learned they were different from the people of Low-Gear.

That provided an elated feeling similar to superiority, but it also brought avoidance and melancholy.

That was the problem Kashima faced and he was not the only one with that problem. A lot of those in the development department and those who had become more naturalized held the same problem.

But…

"That will trouble my generation and the generation directly below us, but that will not last forever. Our children will be told nothing. They will blend into this Gear and know nothing of their ancestors. Our troubles are like a sacrifice to move from the old age to the new one. Isn't that right?"

Tsukuyomi smiled bitterly and thought about Sayama once more.

…A villain.

His method was to ignore the poor reputation it would give him and forcefully attack her weaknesses.

But, thought Tsukuyomi. *He does not need to do that. These troubles have plagued us for the sixty years since the war .*

And yet every one of them would agree to accept the status quo.

There was no point in making waves now.

She faced Sayama while thinking about her own daughter, about Kashima's family, and about the families of the others she knew.

"I appreciate your consideration, but we must maintain the status quo. Without it, our descendants cannot live here in Low-Gear without the same troubles we carry. We will hide our power, hide our troubles, and blend into Low-Gear. And if you insist on forcing us to change…"

"What will you do then?"

She looked at that boy's expressionless face and thought to herself.

…Is he more naïve than I thought?

He had previously verified what she had to offer and reduced her bargaining chips by half. But…

"Then I will bring out a hidden bargaining chip I was holding in reserve. That brings it back up to two. We won't have to accept only half of the status quo."

Sayama listened to her expressionlessly, but Shinjou drew back in surprise next to him.

Seeing that, Tsukuyomi spoke to her instead of him.

She stated the bargaining chip she had held in reserve.

"If you refuse to maintain the status quo, 2nd-Gear will refuse to cooperate with UCAT in the slightest. Depending on the situation, we might even sell our skills and services to an opposing organization. …In case you didn't know, there really are organizations that oppose UCAT."

Shinjou gasped.

…What?

"Japanese UCAT wouldn't be able to function if you did that!"

They would be unable to produce, develop, or maintain any of their equipment, and information on their equipment could be leaked to enemies.

They would lose the materials and equipment they needed to function as an organization.

As Shinjou wondered what they could do, Tsukuyomi formed a troubled expression.

"Don't take this as a threat, okay? It's an issue of labor and compensation for that labor. UCAT pays us for our work, but we need social compensation as well."

Tsukuyomi pointed at Sayama with a smile on her face .

"He is refusing to continue providing that social compensation, so we will refuse to continue providing

you with our labor. And we will not accept money or land in its place. The only thing we want is the status quo . …He is the one who broke the rules first, so if you are going to blame anyone, blame him and his enjoyment of being a villain."

Despite all this, Sayama remained silent.

Not even Shinjou could read any emotion on his face.

Will this be okay? wondered Shinjou.

But she quickly changed what she was thinking.

…I'll trust him. I know he can pull this off somehow.

She stared at the side of his face as she thought.

A certain action occurred in the yard of the Kashima family house.

A father and son were running around.

Kashima was trying to evade his father in his father's yard.

"W-wait, dad! Why so eccentric all of a sudden!?"

"Eccentric!? Don't use those weird foreign words around me!"

His father swung the sword down from above, so Kashima moved aside.

He evaded it, but his movements were dull.

…Of course they are!

His lifestyle did not involve much exercise. He was already breathing heavily due to the tension of the situation.

But his father was different.

"Don't dodge out of the way. Why don't you stop your father's attack which has been strengthened by long years of farming?"

"The instant I do that, you'll tear into my flesh like you 're cultivating the land! …Wah!"

The older man swung the sword horizontally as if cutting down some grass.

Kashima crouched down and leaped backwards as far as he could.

He then recalled that he was a military god.

“Wait! You can’t hurt me with a blade!”

Just as Natsu was protected, he himself could not be harmed by lesser blades.

His father’s actions were meaningless. It was nothing but a threat.

However…

“Not so fast, Aki. I helped make this sword.”

“Eh? Then…”

“It too bears the name Kashima! It’ll cut through you perfectly fine!”

At the same time, the tip of the sword grazed his body as he bent backwards.

The sword cut through the collar of his work uniform and sent it flying through the air. It also scratched his cheek, producing a shallow wound.

…He's serious!

What could he do? This was his father. Would it be acceptable to punch him?

"I-I was a relatively obedient child even during my so-called rebellious phase! So now I can-…"

"You'll never hit me if you have to make an excuse for it!!"

The sword sliced through the air.

Kashima evaded it while gasping for breath.

His father attacked from the right, right, left, lower middle, and finally above.

As his father held the sword up to swing it down, Kashima turned tail and ran.

"Wait, Aki! I can't cut you if you run! Your arm! At least give me your arm!"

"I don't like the sound of that last comment, dad!"

As soon as Kashima shouted that, his feet were scooped out from under him.

"!?"

His vision quickly fell forward.

He saw a rope which had wrapped around his feet at some point.

Holding the other end of the rope was an old woman in Japanese clothes standing at the edge of the house.

He then fell to the ground completely.

"Mom, you're on his side!?" he shouted while frantically trying to get up.

But his father approached before he could.

He was holding the sword up to swing it down.

Kashima's immediate reaction was to kick off one of his sandals.

"Trip!"

His sandal landed sideways underneath where his father was placing his foot.

His father stepped on it, lost his balance, and tripped.

As his father fell, Kashima realized a certain fact.

Causing someone to trip as they approached with a sword would only cause them to fall on top of him.

"Ah."

His father collapsed like a felled tree and swung his sword down.

For some reason, he looked a bit happy.

"Waaahh! Natsu-saaaaan!"

Kashima frantically tried to flee so as not to be crushed by his father.

He tried to crawl forward, but then he heard his father's voice.

"I'm glad to hear you calling Na-chan's name, but won't you be in the same position as her once you lose your right arm and can't work!?"

"!"

His father's words brought a thought to Kashima's mind.

…I…

This thought caused him to stop moving.

And then his father's sword struck Kashima's right shoulder.

Sayama expressionlessly looked toward Tsukuyomi.

He brushed up his hair while Shinjou and Tsukuyomi looked at him.

"You are willing to bring your labor into a negotiation with the fate of the world at stake? You are not going to make this easy, are you?"

And…

"Why do you want to join Low-Gear so much?"

"It would be meaningless for me to answer that. I am the one asking the questions at the moment."

With a smile, Tsukuyomi stopped him from speaking further.

She pointed down at her feet.

"Answer me this, bearer of the Leviathan Road: What weapons will UCAT have without us? What about armor ? Tools? Or any other equipment? If you have no answer, then you have only one option." She took a breath. "You must support maintaining the status quo for 2nd-Gear."

Sayama remained perfectly silent.

As he maintained his lack of expression, Shinjou stared at him.

Her expression was tinged with concern, but there was a hint of something else as well.

When Sayama noticed, he asked her about it in a lighthearted tone.

“Shinjou-kun, why do you look relieved?”

“B-because you have some kind of plan, right?”

“Oh?” Sayama tilted his head and spoke with a candid expression. “I have no plan.”

The instant he said that, Shinjou gasped and Tsukuyomi failed to suppress a smile.

Shinjou’s mouth hung open wordlessly and Tsukuyomi’s smile deepened.

“Interesting. They say the surname Sayama indicates a villain, but perhaps you still have a ways to go. It doesn’t seem you’ve become a true villain under 2nd-Gear’s concepts.”

Sayama tilted his head as if wondering what she meant.

"May I say one thing?"

"What is it? Are you going to allow us to maintain the status quo?"

Her question was accompanied by a smile, but Sayama 's response was short.

"Allow me to say it again: you fool."

And…

"Let me be very clear: your labor will not function as a bargaining chip."

Sayama partially closed his eyes and opened his mouth.

"That was an interesting argument," he said with an impressed tone. "The way you talk about 2nd-Gear's technology…"

"Yes?"

"You make it sound like you are the only ones in the world who can develop technology."

His words fell to the ground with a bitter smile and Tsukuyomi's body stiffened.

But Sayama did not stop.

"The Germans have their technology known as spells. Perhaps they could reach your level? Also, look at this cell phone I have. Think of the computers we use, the kanji we write with, or the English language. If you want to go back even further, the spread of iron came from the ancient Hittites," he said. "I do not see a single thing here that was invented by you."

That comment produced a reaction from Tsukuyomi.

"Then what do you hope to do!? It may be true that we didn't create every piece of technology in the world, but V-Sw and Ex-St were made by us. Not to mention all the other equipment and weapons you use! What will you do if you lose us!?"

Sayama's answer was simple.

"We will hire someone else."

He took a breath.

"That is how labor works."

"…!"

He ignored the intensity of her gaze and continued.

"Enough nonsense, Director Tsukuyomi. I hope you see the error of your ways. And let me say this: we can continue on just fine without you."

"Hah. Don't get conceited. You think you can use and surpass what we created!? You Japanese created your culture and society by copying 2nd-Gear!"

"Copying? What a wonderful compliment. That means we are able to mass produce."

And…

"Know this: We are a race who is able to create something new from the copy. Continental Asia? The West? 2nd-Gear? Every culture and society is nothing but a cutting-edge fashion for us. After all, we can steal it for

ourselves, imitate it, and bring about a new age. Goodbye old-fashioned original. Hello our new fad. If you don't like it, add copyright protection into your culture and society. …Then again, we will still break through it."

Sayama folded his arms before continuing.

"Also, you tried to use your technology as a bargaining chip via your labor, didn't you?"

"Yes. What about it?"

Sayama nodded and began to speak.

"If you choose to leave, three things will happen. First, your successors will capably continue with your work. Second, you will not be allowed to bring any technology-related data with you. And third." Sayama smiled. "Everything you have made here is trademarked and copyrighted by Japanese UCAT, so prepare yourself. Wherever you work next, make sure you develop completely new technology from the ground up."

Tsukuyomi stood motionlessly with nothing to say in response.

Shinjou gulped and looked up at Sayama.

Sayama, however, did not turn toward her.

After a short moment, Sayama asked Tsukuyomi another question.

“Did that wake you up?”

A wind carrying a slight chill blew over the yard of hardened dirt.

Kashima suddenly opened his eyes as he felt that wind .

He found himself crouching down in the yard. And…

“My right arm…”

It was intact. He frantically touched it with his left hand, but his arm was still connected to his shoulder. However…

“The sword…”

The blade was definitely located on his shoulder.

The Japanese sword had torn through the right shoulder of his work uniform and the shirt below it. The blade was still touching his skin.

However, it had only left a shallow mark on his skin. It was nothing more than a scratch.

The wound on his shoulder was no worse than the one on his cheek from before.

It was such a shallow wound that he was not even bleeding.

That sword had been forged with the surname Kashima, so why had it stopped at this?

A voice behind him gave him the answer.

“I didn’t go easy on you or lie,” said his father. “You just rank this much higher than me as a military god and a swordsmith.”

Those with the same surname could rank higher or lower than each other depending on their level of training.

That fact and the truth it told him made Kashima stop breathing for a moment.

“Do you get it now, Aki?”

“…”

“What you learned from my father and your training at UCAT have made you better than me. You may be denying your name as a military god, but that name will never leave you. Names don’t go away just because you deny them.”

That power was not something he could let go of. It would only grow greater the more he reached for it.

…Once I wield that power, can it never be lost or reduced again?

No matter what life he hoped for, he would never lose that power.

That was the truth.

“Then will I always be like this?” he muttered.

He received an answer almost immediately.

"There is a way."

"Eh?"

He turned around and looked up to find his father looking down at him.

His father nodded once and spoke.

"Give your name a different meaning."

"A different meaning?"

His father pulled back the sword while it was still on his shoulder.

However, it did not slice his flesh. He felt it lightly scrape over his skin, but only his clothing was cut.

"Listen, Aki. Simply denying your name will not deny your power, so you need to give this some thought."

"Thought about what I want to be with this name?"

"I didn't say that." His father's voice contained a smile . "Only you can give meaning to your name. The name Kashima originally referred to a military god. Its

meaning as a swordsmith was added later by our ancestors. In that case, you can-…”

“Can I really do it?”

Kashima slowly stood up and turned around.

His father stood there holding the sword.

He belatedly remembered his father was shorter than him.

He looked his father in the eye and restated his question.

“Can I really give different meaning to my power?”

“How should I know, idiot. It took our ancestors years and years to bring the power of a swordsmith to the name Kashima. It was meant to give us some power to help win the Concept War. I don’t know if you can manage this on your own, but there is one thing I know for sure.” He took a breath. “If you don’t do anything, you’ll never know if you can do it or not.”

“…”

"My father and the others had to have been the same when they created Susaou and Totsuka, so if you have a change of heart, look at this."

His father snapped his fingers on his left hand.

At some point, his mother had moved from the house and next to his father.

She held out a large brown waterproof envelope.

It seemed to contain some kind of document.

Kashima took it and the flexibility of the paper inside told him it contained a bundle of Japanese paper.

His parents nodded when he looked at them, so he opened the envelope and pulled out the paper.

Written on the paper were…

"Names?"

Countless surnames were listed on hundreds of pieces of Japanese paper.

"During the creation of Totsuka, it seems Ooshiro Hiromasa created this from the list of 2nd-Gear names my father gave him. These characters and surnames were used in Totsuka."

"So this belongs to the man who opposed my grandfather…"

Kashima stared at the envelope.

The past held physical form there. He could hold it in his hands and see it with his eyes.

"If my memory holds, the 'countless' names were divided by job, combined together, and therefore compressed into approximately one thousand names. It seems he started creating it on March 10, 1945 and finished in the early morning of the 12th."

It Kashima's father was correct, the compressed list of 2nd-Gear names had taken two days to create. Kashima began to speak while wondering if that was possible.

"Why did he do that? I thought he didn't get along with my grandfather."

"Idiot. Didn't I tell you I don't know? That was enough for me, but it isn't for you. So take it. If you do decide on something, look at it then," said his father with a smile. "You've been worrying over this for eight years now, right? It's about time you made up your mind and chose what path you want to head down."

Three figures stood motionlessly on the field from which Susaou was visible.

Sayama, Shinjou, and Tsukuyomi did not move an inch even as the afternoon wind blew across them.

Tsukuyomi's head was still raised and Sayama looked directly at her.

The look in his eyes was quiet and admonishing. He spoke with the same tone as was in his eyes.

"Do not bring culture and society into this, Director Tsukuyomi. Those things are only the material from which the world is made and the person who bears them is always changing. They are of no use in a negotiation for peace."

Those words finally produced a movement.

Tsukuyomi embraced her own body and appeared defensive.

“What do you mean by that?” She continued her words of protest. “Are you saying it’s wrong of us to wish our descendants to have peace just because we have nothing but technology? Do you think you’re some kind of god?”

In response, Sayama smiled once and held a black binder to his chest.

“Yes. Unfortunately, I am in a very good mood today, so I feel even greater than a god. And so let me say this: it is natural.” He took a breath. “Listen, Director Tsukuyomi. Peace is not something you wish for. It is something natural that should be there. You must not work for it or wish for it. You claim this is for your descendants, but what excuse will you make for them when you force misfortune onto them?”

“You say it should be there, but it is not. That is why-…”

Someone other than Sayama suddenly cut her off.

"What do you mean it isn't there?"

It was Shinjou.

"U-um, Director Tsukuyomi. You said you wanted to maintain the status quo, right? But now you're saying you don't have peace. In that case…"

Shinjou's question trailed off and disappeared, but Tsukuyomi's shoulders still trembled.

Sayama then nodded toward no one in particular as if to say "Do you get it now?"

"Yes. You do not have what is natural and you do not even know how to work toward regaining it. That is why you must 'wish' for it, correct? You understand nothing, but you want to keep everything as it is in the hope that the problem will resolve itself with enough time."

However…

"That will change nothing. Even if you seal off all information, someone will eventually learn of the past and worry over the same things you are now. And that is not all."

Sayama looked up into the sky. He then looked across the forest in three directions and finally looked up at Susaou in front of them.

"I am here for the Leviathan Road. What exactly do you think the 'status quo' is to me? Did you ever stop to think about that, Director Tsukuyomi?"

"Well…"

Tsukuyomi was unable to answer, so Sayama continued.

"Once the Leviathan Road is over, the concepts of every other Gear will be released to counteract the negative concepts of this Gear. I do not know what will happen then, so I cannot say if the world will remain as it is."

…I do not know if the status quo can be maintained.

With that thought in mind, another thought floated up in Sayama's chest.

It was an announcement he had carved into his heart.

"I want to face every Gear. I want to face everything. And that includes what comes after the Leviathan Road. That is what I mean when I say I reject 2nd-Gear's demand to maintain the status quo. You need to be able to handle any future that may arrive. And that includes the possibility of this Gear being destroyed after the Leviathan Road ends."

"Destroyed…?"

A slight smile was enough of a response.

"Does it really surprise you? If the Leviathan Road fails, Low-Gear will be destroyed. However, it is possible some people will survive that destruction. If that happens, will you still wish for the status quo?"

"…"

"How about it? Will you be reconsidering your stance on the status quo?"

With that question, Sayama held out his left hand.

Tsukuyomi took several seconds to realize what this meant.

She averted her gaze and let out a bitter laugh.

“So Team Leviathan does not want 2nd-Gear to ally with you so easily, is that it?”

“It is not that we want this to be difficult. What we need is a resolution that leaves no grudges or regrets behind.”

Tsukuyomi gave another bitter laugh.

“Why are you holding your hand out to an old woman like me?”

Despite what she said, she obediently reached out her own slender hand.

As well as the other hand.

“…”

Sayama exchanged a glance with Shinjou, but quickly gave a bitter smile.

Sayama held out his left hand, so Shinjou held out her right hand and they both took one of Tsukuyomi’s hands .

Despite being the one to initiate this, Tsukuyomi gave an awkward smile.

After a few seconds, she let out an exhausted sigh, let go of their hands, and spoke.

“But whatever happens, it’s Kashima’s decision. Wait just a bit longer for your answer.”

“I hope he is the sort of man you think he is.”

Hearing that, Tsukuyomi relaxed her shoulders and sighed again.

“You may be Kashima’s version of Ooshiro Hiromasa.”

“The old man’s father who could not prevent 2nd-Gear’s destruction?”

“You seem to know a little about him. When our ancestors evacuated to Low-Gear, Kashima supposedly said this to Ooshiro Hiromasa: You did not intend to truly face 2nd-Gear’s destruction.”

Tsukuyomi stared overhead once more.

She stared at the 500 meter humanoid machine with the bridge in the head destroyed.

"Construction of Susaou began on March 12, 1945."

"March 12…"

"Does that remind you of something?"

"Yes. When I saw that date in the cafeteria yesterday, it reminded me of a certain incident. It is likely related to what you just said. The incident which drove Ooshiro Hiromasa to face that destruction occurred from March 9 to 10 of '45."

"And that is…?"

"I plan to do some research into it as a step toward facing your Gear."

Sayama smiled and Tsukuyomi smiled back.

He seems very different from just a moment ago, thought Tsukuyomi. *The surname Sayama indicates a villain, hm?*

That last thought urged her to provide further information.

"Susaou was completed August 1, 1946. The final result came two weeks later. No one knows what exactly happened up there and Kashima once pursued that question. He wanted to know why his grandfather and Ooshiro Hiromasa worked so desperately toward the same goal despite disliking each other. He wanted to know what his grandfather had been thinking."

"It is worth looking into for both us and him. We must know each other if we are to fix the discord between Low-Gear and 2nd-Gear that began sixty years ago."

"Yes." Tsukuyomi nodded and put a hand in her lab coat pocket. "Kashima gave me this floppy. It contains the list of 2nd-Gear names that his grandfather provided Ooshiro Hiromasa. It also contains Yamata's question."

"Testament. I will gladly accept that."

"But you have at least vaguely grasped what Yamata's question is, haven't you?"

"Testament. I believe I know what it is: what is Yamata 's name?"

Tsukuyomi did not respond, but she did smile.

Sayama reached out and took the disk.

“When Ooshiro Hiromasa found the answer, he used this list as a hint, didn’t he?”

“It seems so. The next time we gather, you will need your answer. Kashima will likely provide our stance before long. We will use his decision to decide on the date for the Leviathan Road.”

“Testament.”

“Very well then.”

Tsukuyomi placed her hands on her hips and nodded.

The afternoon sun began to pass behind some clouds in the sky.

Chapter 17: A Scream in the Rain

Chapter 17

“A Scream in the Rain”

Not everything is inevitable
There are some places where “yes” will certainly be said
But the one to shout it has to reach that place first

Not everything is inevitable

There are some places where "yes" will certainly be said[1]

But the one to shout it has to reach that place first

Just as the clouds hid the afternoon sun, the wind began to blow.

The white-walled building of Japanese UCAT's headquarters trembled very slightly in the wind.

The noise could be heard in the first-floor lobby.

Two figures were there to hear it: Ooshiro Itaru and Sf.

Itaru sat on the sofa while drinking a glass of water.

"Sf, how is my old man doing?"

"Testament. He is holed up in his room. Should I check inside with my thermovision?"

"Can you also shoot lasers? If he's playing an 18+ game, fire one into his ass."

"Eye beams is an available option. Please email a request to German UCAT's Sf Development Official. Students receive a 50% discount, so I can forge a student ID if necessary."

"Oh? How kind of you. What goes on in that brain of yours?"

Sf nodded and pointed at her own head.

"Testament. The artificial synapses of my artificial brain are preserved at minus forty degrees, a temperature cold enough to hammer a nail with a banana ."

"I see. Is that why you're so coldhearted?"

"No. The oil that acts as my blood is kept at room temperature. My exterior is kept at a slightly lower temperature to reproduce an artificial coldness."

"That's what makes you coldhearted."

Itaru sank into the sofa and did not even turn toward Sf as he spoke.

“You sit down, too.”

“Testament.”

Sf sat sideways on Itaru’s lap.

He half-closed his eyes.

“What’s this? Did I ask you to use your master as a chair?”

“Testament. You told me to sit down. My deep memory contains an incident when you asked me to sit down in a train and you stopped me when I attempted to sit on the floor. If the floor would be preferable, I can move there.”

“I see, I see. I’m shocked. You can actually learn? I’m truly shocked.”

“Testament. If you are delighted, please stamp this card.”

Itaru wordlessly stamped the card and returned it. Sf bowed.

"Testament. Kazuo-sama certainly has been staying in his room a lot lately. Is he trying to rot away in there?"

"Let him rot. This is because…his old man destroyed 2nd-Gear."

"That statement is incorrect. Based on the records I have recently reviewed and the conversation from the other day, 2nd-Gear was destroyed because the people of the Gear overused their control system until they lost control of it."

"That's why. If there was anything the people of 2nd-Gear could have done, they could have shared the sin. But my old man's old man was the one who should have been able to do something. He failed on his own and bore the sin on his own," explained Itaru. " Remember this: my old man's feelings about this are complicated. He's the one person who knows the full story."

"The full story?"

"That's right. His old man was the one who couldn't stop Yamata in 2nd-Gear, so why was he able to do it here in Low-Gear? My old man was a kid back then, so he knows the answer."

Itaru looked up at Sf.

"Do you want to know why?"

"Not really."

"Then I won't tell you. …Now, I'm about to talk to myself for a bit, so don't listen."

"Testament. I will begin speaking to myself as well."

Itaru took a drink from his glass, looked up at the ceiling, and opened his mouth to speak.

"The project to build Susaou began March 12, 1945. Three days before that, a certain event occurred in Tokyo. And my old man's old man took part in the event even though his friends tried to stop him."

"I can determine this event was something quite flashy . …By the way, that was me speaking to myself."

"Then this is me talking to myself. …It was a flashy festival. So flashy it's still written about in history textbooks." Itaru let out a breath. "After all, it created such a cry of pain that the city of Tokyo was almost destroyed."

Shinjou and Sayama arrived at Shinjuku in Tokyo.

Sayama had said they needed some material on World War Two, so he had gone around to the different major bookstores and bought a few books. Shinjou had never seen the big city before, so she was overwhelmed by the size of the bookstores.

"Would you want to live in a place like this?"

When Sayama had asked her that, she had nodded.

After leaving the Showa Memorial Park, he had not asked about her.

He had not asked about why she had been late or about the lie she had mentioned the night before.

Currently, he was simply pulling on her hand as they walked toward Shinjuku Station.

They were surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the city. People and their voices filled every direction.

And seemingly catching all those people were the lines of buildings and car-filled roads.

When the faint oppressiveness of it all caused her to look up toward the heavens, she saw the gloomy sky and felt the wind blowing down from it.

The humid wind was filled with the scent of the city.

The dampness of the wind told Shinjou it would rain soon and she started to look around.

"A-are we going to the station? Are we going back? Is it going to rain soon?"

"Ha ha ha. I will answer each of our questions in turn: we can reach the station from anywhere, we can return at any time, and we still have some time before it rains. After all, we are on our way to a moment in the past."

Sayama let go of her hand and pulled a book from the paper bag under his arm.

"I have finally found a common point between 2nd-Gear and us for this Leviathan Road. Here it is."

"An overview of American aerial missions during World War Two? How… How is this a common point?"

"Do you remember when the project to build Susaou began? March 12, 1945. …When you think about it, there is no greater point in common. Do you remember back in UCAT's cafeteria when I said I would mention something once I had confirmation?"

"Oh, that's right. Did you find some kind of meaning in that date?"

"An excellent question, Shinjou-kun. I feel as if I am returning to a simpler time. …Three days before that date, something very similar to 2nd-Gear's destruction occurred here in Low-Gear."

"Eh?"

What did he mean?

The other Gears were connected to Low Gear in fixed places via the ley lines. However, she had not heard of any indirect effects like that. And this would be something similar to destruction.

"Y-you're kidding, right? After all, Tokyo is right here. It wasn't destroyed."

"No, it was not. It survived and it recovered."

Sayama suddenly stopped walking.

They stood at the center of the large scramble crossing in front of Shinjuku Station's east entrance.

"Look, Shinjou-kun."

Drawn by his words, Shinjou looked around.

A great number of people were moving out of the way and walking past them. Lines of cars were waiting for all of the people to cross.

And on the asphalt road supporting them all were structures made from a metal framework.

Shinjou felt the humidity press in at her throat.

Sayama's left arm suddenly wrapped around her back.

"A busy place, isn't it?"

"Looking at it again… Tokyo is an amazing place."

"Yes, but this city was nearly destroyed once. That is a fact."

"Eh?"

Her questioning tone brought Sayama's gaze toward her.

"It happened on March 9, 1945. That was approximately five months before Japan surrendered in World War Two. And it was three days before the project to build Susaou began. On that day, the American military performed a certain experiment on the city of Tokyo."

"A-an experiment? What kind of experiment?"

"The same experiment they had earlier performed on Hamburg, Germany and failed. While bombing, they used flammable fuel in place of normal explosives. They performed a firebombing," said Sayama. "Tokyo was

constructed from wood, so the result of the experiment was clear. In one night, approximately 120 thousand people died and almost all buildings in Tokyo were destroyed. That experiment elicited the greatest cry of pain Japan gave during World War Two."

"You mean…"

"Yes, the Firebombing of Tokyo."

And…

"Why did Ooshiro Hiromasa grow so serious about constructing Susaou and Totsuka after he did not save 2nd-Gear? …The answer is simple."

"You don't mean…"

"Yes. He was here when Tokyo was bombed. He saw it with his own eyes. He saw his own world of Low-Gear destroyed in flames."

Sayama remained expressionless as he spoke.

And Shinjou saw Baku poke his head from the breast pocket of Sayama's suit.

The first thing Sayama could sense was light.

He saw crimson. He saw the color of flames.

He also heard noise, saw motion, and saw the scenery. But…

…It is all mixed together.

Flames burned.

Was he in a village, a town, or a city?

Sayama knew the answer: this was Tokyo.

The sky was covered with dark clouds and smoke. Flames and wind blew across the land.

Countless shades of scarlet colored the crumbling people and houses.

He heard countless sounds of something being dropped from the sky.

He also heard ringing fire bells and people's voices.

The heat sent countless voices crying together into the sky.

Amid those voices were people crying for their father, their mother, their son, or their daughter. Some were crying for their grandfather or grandmother.

All those voices gathered together, but not a single response came.

The sounds of destruction and the whistling of flames slammed the crying voices into the ground and the color of flames blasted up into the sky.

The scene of Tokyo burning lay before Sayama.

"…!"

He clearly saw it.

He saw dark shadows. As they crumbled in the flames, he could not even tell if they were people or buildings. As people ran and shouted in confusion, the attacks from above scattered the color scarlet across them.

The wind blew, but it did not bring in rain. It only caused the flames to dance.

This air current was created when a large area was burning. It first gathered flames around itself and then raced across the city in search of oxygen.

The wind was not merely hot; it was burning.

Wind as hot as fire raced across Tokyo in every direction and burned away rows of houses just by caressing them.

East, west, north, and south. The raging wind guided the flames in every direction.

That wind raced about to find air.

The rivers flowing through Tokyo were all filled with people trying to escape the heat, but the burning wind descended to the river and roasted them as well.

The people standing atop the bridges were struck by the hot wind flying in from the side.

The heat cooked the metal of the bridges and easily bent them. Once set afire by napalm and exposed to the blazing wind, the bridges' arch structures melted and they collapsed into the river in no time at all.

Before the water could splash up, the shimmering of flames and the black of smoke rose up.

No one could escape. They were not allowed to.

Most of the air-raid shelters were roasted inside and out because their doors were sucked open by the pressure difference created by the flames.

The roads, buildings, rivers, basements, people, and everything else touching the air were roasted and they instantly showed one what carbon was.

Above the rising smoke, shimmering, and screams, countless dark shadows and dark rain could be seen in the sky.

The shadows were large B-29 bombers and the rain was a barrage of incendiary bombs.

Occasionally, a few of the bombers would descend and fly close by over Tokyo.

As the great noise and heat assaulted Tokyo again and again, Sayama saw something.

A man stood still in front of an Izumo truck which had been burned with the city.

Sayama knew who he was.

“Ooshiro Hiromasa!”

Hiromasa wore a lab coat and stood within that city which was nothing but shimmering and light.

The stone hanging from his neck emitted its blue light at full force.

That light protected him so that he grew dirty but did not burn. He shouted something and questioned the city.

“_____!?”

Is anyone there? Hurry up and evacuate. Get out of here. All of his cries were drowned out by the wind and the bombs. The heat twisted the screams he heard, so he could not even grasp how far away they were.

But he continued shouting and ran aimlessly through the burning city. He jumped over what looked like clumps of charcoal lying in the roads, tripped over one, fell, and continued running.

He ran through a flame-filled alley, trying to find a safe street.

But just before he made his way out into one, a burning wind passed through the street like a wall.

“!”

That one quick pass brought a great roar with it.

Once the flaming wind had passed, nothing remained.

The buildings, people, and everything else were unrecognizably covered in flames, leaving only black silhouettes.

No matter which way he looked, he saw only the burning ground and the night sky filled with sparks.

He fell to his knees when he reached the empty, flame-filled street.

Sayama suddenly spoke while watching him from behind.

He spoke his unheard voice which could not reach the past.

“You failed.”

Hiromasa hung his head down.

“You knew there was nothing you could have done, but you still wanted to gather the survivors and feel that you had ‘saved’ them. That desire came to you here, didn ’t it? You wanted to atone for failing to save 2nd-Gear.”

But…

“But the destruction did not even allow you that.”

Hiromasa touched the blue stone hanging from his neck.

“So will you destroy yourself? If destruction is the only path remaining for the world, will you gain a lonely superiority by destroying yourself ahead of time? If that is what you intend, just look before you.”

A wave of crimson assaulted the street before Hiromasa's eyes.

That wave resembled a giant serpent. It was the largest fire current created by the center of Tokyo burning. It undulated, blew across the rows of houses, and brought a burning wind.

"Now, Ooshiro Hiromasa. This is a crossroads. To take responsibility for being able to do nothing, will you throw away your protective stone and wish to be destroyed along with everyone else? Or will you cling to your small life and expose yourself to the shame?"

The expanding flames seemed to answer Sayama.

Hiromasa reacted. He squeezed the philosopher's stone in his right hand.

"!"

He tore it from the string around his neck.

"Now, what will you do with that stone? Make your decision!"

As if responding to Sayama's question, Hiromasa slowly raised his hand.

He was preparing to throw it.

But then he saw something.

The flames approaching around him lit up everything and made their structure clear.

"…"

Something lay collapsed there.

Something sat motionless on its knees.

Something lay motionless over a child.

Something had placed a blanket over a child to protect it, but had become just as motionless as the child.

Hiromasa had a child of his own. But the flames ignored that fact as they easily burned everything away.

Everything burned. Everything turned to charcoal.

Soon thereafter, Hiromasa opened his mouth.

"Oh…"

A voice escaped.

"Oahhhhhh!"

His voice became a great cry similar to a newborn's and it did not stop.

He then began to move.

But he did not throw away the stone. He held it in his hand as he formed a solid fist.

The philosopher's stone which kept him alive was no longer something which simply hung from his neck. He now clenched it in his fist.

He forcefully stood up while continuing to cry out.

Sayama only existed as his vision, but he smiled at the action.

"So you have chosen to live in disgrace, engineer of the past! That is the action of one who continues forward without fearing failure!"

With the flames before him, Hiromasa looked up into the sky.

He opened his mouth, arched his back, and shouted something further.

This was a cry of protest. It was a voice of anger.

As Sayama watched, he spoke in response to that protest.

“Shout! Feel your anger! Destroy your hesitant heart! Face the unreasonable sight before you!”

He looked at the flames in front of him.

“Let out a scream!”

And Hiromasa did just that. He let out a loud, loud voice toward the many, many flames before him.

“I…”

He threw his fist toward the burning wind which ripped him from the ground and blew him away.

“I…!!”

As Sayama heard that shout, he was knocked from the past.

A narrow road traveled through the forest of Okutama ’s mountains.

No cars drove on this road, but a man wearing a work uniform walked along it as clouds began to cover the sky .

He was Kashima.

The right shoulder of his clothes was still torn from a sword strike.

In his left arm, he held the thick waterproof envelope his parents had given him.

He thought while the cold wind bringing rain pushed at his back.

…What should I do?

That thought filled his mind and would not leave.

What should he do?

With his past in the 3rd Production Room before his eyes, he had run away. That had reminded him of a certain fact.

…That is where I used to be.

Long ago when he had failed to fulfill his grandfather's dying request, he had tried to forget by losing himself in his power as a man of 2nd-Gear.

And in doing so, he had forgotten about the person he cared about as a man of Low-Gear.

"Natsu-san…"

He had forgotten about her and had only remembered once he had hurt her and rescued her.

He would never forget that again.

But at the same time, he had begun to deny something.

He had been denying that thought for so long now.

"I was denying that I had not forgotten my power."

The cut in the right shoulder of his clothes told him all he needed to know about his power.

…I can never truly be someone of Low-Gear.

He looked like one, his culture was similar, and he had a family there, but there was nothing he could do about his own existence at the base of it all.

But the thought still would not leave.

"What should I do?"

There was a simple answer: he just had to stop having these thoughts.

He just needed to forget about his power. If he did not, he could not be honest with Natsu and Harumi.

…Should I continue lying and lose myself in my power again?

No, he thought.

"But," he muttered.

…But what am I supposed to do?

Suddenly, the cold wind blew across him once more.

The chill snapped him out of his thoughts and he realized he had stopped walking.

Ahead of him, the road turned sharply to the right. This was to circle around a steep slope that jutted out.

“This is…”

It was where that landslide had occurred eight years ago. This was where it had all been determined.

Kashima stood at the location of his past.

As he stood silently, something small struck his shoulder.

It was rain.

The rain fell from the sky and began gently striking Kashima and his surroundings, but it gradually grew stronger.

The rain did not stop.

It only grew more intense.

In the plaza in front of Shinjuku Station, rain clouds filled the sky and the wind blew, but the flow of people did not lessen.

As everyone moved to their destinations to escape the coming rain, a single figure sat on a stone step.

This figure crouching at the bottom of all the noise was Shinjou.

Another figure walked toward her.

It was Sayama. He held a cup out toward her.

“Want a drink?” he asked.

Shinjou looked up and gave a weak smile.

“Oh, sure. Thanks. What kind is it? Don’t tell me it’s 100% sea urchin juice or something.”

“Ha ha ha. We are not in a shady secret organization beneath Okutama. It is just tea.”

"I see. …That feels kind of empty," she said with a bitter smile.

Sayama thought on her comment.

…Would it have fit her ideal image of me if I had bought something strange?

If he had searched for an IAI vending machine, he could have found something that packed a punch. It would not have been as much as what one found in UCAT, but it would have been a start.

…Did I make the wrong choice? No, but… No, no. But…

"S-Sayama-kun? It looks like you're lost in thought about something. A-are you okay?"

"Y-yes. Sorry. I was just thinking about my ideal self."

"That sounds suspicious… But what drink did you get ?"

"Strawberry milk."

"…"

"I have a lot to think about, so I need sugar for my brain. I also need calcium for concentration, so this was the best option. Yes. Now that I think about it again, this choice is well worth praising me ove-… What is with that look?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking nothing I said could stop you."

Shinjou's expression then returned to normal.

"I can't believe you're fine after seeing such a harsh part of the past. You really are tough, Sayama-kun."

"Really? Setsu-kun once said I am surprisingly timid."

"Enough about that," she said with an exasperated look.

He was unsure how to react and Shinjou seemed to sense something from his expression. She lowered her head and said "sorry".

"But I wonder if Ooshiro-san's father was able to truly feel the destruction of 2nd-Gear in that bombing," she said.

"I think we can assume so. He saw what would happen to this world if Yamata appeared here. That was why he put all his thought into creating Susaou and answering Yamata's question." Sayama nodded. "And the people of 2nd-Gear held the same thoughts. And they must still hold them."

"Eh?"

He narrowed his eyes and nodded in response to Shinjou's questioning tone.

He spoke what it was he had learned during the preliminary negotiations.

"I believe 2nd-Gear is a sleeping dragon. They wish for peace, but are still able to choose the best option. That is what they did sixty years ago. Those who created Susaou and Totsuka had to have raised a cry of resistance in response to what they had lost."

He took a breath and asked a question.

"Can you hear it, Shinjou-kun? Can you hear 2nd-Gear letting out a scream as they awaken from their slumber?"

The rain soaked Kashima, but he continued facing the slope ahead of him.

His eyes stared forward at the guardrail that cut him off from the slope.

The guardrail turned to the right to follow the new road, but the old road lay behind it, buried by the slope.

Most of the bottom of the slope was hidden by concrete.

This was a place of memories. It had once received that concrete makeup, but the rain caused hard mud to spew from the cracks and from above. Its old face peeked through.

As the mud spilled down, he heard a soft noise. It seemed to be asking a gentle question: why are you here?

The sun must have warmed the ground because mist began to rise across the area.

He was surrounded by rain, mist, and a slight wind.

The gathering clouds above produced the rain.

As he heard the rain falling, Kashima looked into the forest and up into the sky.

"A world much like this once existed."

The people who had tried and failed to protect that world had argued with each other.

But even as they did, they had worked to protect this new world.

Why was that?

Why had the two fought yet protected this world together?

…I don't know.

That was the past and it was what others had done. There was no way he could know.

But he had had a certain thought about it in the past.

"Even if I can never fully understand, I can still approach an understanding."

…That's right.

His grandfather had told him stories of a war in a different world.

He had not thought they were true and his grandfather had always enjoyed telling them, but the old man had always looked sad at the end.

…I never said anything about that sad look.

"Can we really just forget it all?"

Could they really just forget about his grandfather and the thoughts his grandfather had given him?

"Can we really just forget it all?"

He realized the answer was no. And he realized no one but him could arrive at that point.

"…"

The sky suddenly grew blurry in his vision. He assumed the rain had fallen in his eye.

The rain felt oddly warm. It seemed to have body heat. As he felt that rain, he spoke to himself.

"I need to decide."

What are you saying? he thought, but not even that could stop the words from coming.

"This must be the place where I need to make a decision."

This was where he had come to fear his own power and where he had gained something precious.

He trembled as he stared at the slope which was partially covered in concrete.

The trembling he had felt in front of the 3rd Production Room returned.

Choosing the old road would bring trembling.

With that in mind, he turned toward the new road to his side. That safe road brought no trembling.

But he quickly shook his head. It looked like he was shaking something off.

"There is something I need before I can head down that road."

He took a breath and took a certain action.

He would cross the guardrail. He would move to the other side where the slope lay waiting.

Amid the rain, he took one step and then another.

With that action, he crossed the guardrail and stopped on the other side.

He could not stop the trembling.

Even so, he had chosen to stand here.

That was his decision.

He used his trembling body to take in a breath.

He opened his mouth and spoke as if addressing someone.

“This is the method I choose.”

He took a breath.

“I will carry the past as I walk down a new road.”

He walked through the rain and approached the slope.

He trembled, but the trembling gradually vanished as he continued forward.

And as he walked, he recalled the past.

He recalled his grandfather asking for forgiveness in the very end.

He recalled the disappointment of finding the bridge in Susaou's head destroyed.

And he recalled causing this landslide and grasping Natsu's incomplete hand.

Amid all of those memories, there was one thing he could say for sure.

There was one thing in common about all of his questions, anger, resentment, and joy.

…It all came from having this power.

He could not forget or rid himself of those memories.

Those memories had left him conflicted for so long and he had not been able to shake free of them even when he gained a family.

"But there is one thing I never asked of the power that caused it all."

He stood before the slope and spoke in a scratchy voice.

"Can my power do anything other than take things from me?"

He took in a breath and placed his left hand on the dirt of the slope.

He slowly held up his right hand and shook his head.

"I know it's selfish! But I…I want to use this power which hurt the person I care for the most!"

He swung his right fist into the muddy slope before his eyes.

A splashing sound rang out.

"I want to use it to regain everything I lost!"

His hand sank into the mud up to the wrist. The soft and wet mud was warm from the sun.

As he felt the heat in his right hand, some of the rain on his face entered his mouth.

That warm rain dripped onto his tongue and he tasted it.

…It tastes just like blood.

He tasted that flavor and sensed his right hand in the mud.

The wet feeling in his hand was a lot like what he had felt while holding Natsu's hand back then.

He had not forgotten.

The trembling of his spine expressed the emotions brought by the same sensation as eight years ago.

But he could no longer turn his back on the slope.

"I…"

His voice trembled as if he were bearing with something.

"I am going to lie to you, Natsu-san."

I'm sorry, he thought. *I'm sorry, Natsu-san.*

I am trying to once more wield the power that hurt you.

I'm sorry, Harumi. Your father is a liar.

But I will not apologize for lying after this. I will not say sorry.

"Because I have made up my mind."

He had decided to lie and to protect everything with his own power.

And with his decision made, he turned to the right.

He grasped the feeling from eight years ago as well as some mud and looked toward the new road.

The asphalt road seemed to continue on forever.

"…"

Every part of his body sensed his heavy breathing and racing pulse.

But his heart remained calm.

…I am not choosing 2nd-Gear or Low-Gear.

"I am choosing to hide my 2nd-Gear power and remain within Low-Gear."

…The place to which I am headed is not one or the other.

He had decided. He felt it was selfish, but he could find no more opposition to the idea than that.

And so he made up his mind.

He pulled his right hand from the slope and opened his mouth.

"Oh…"

A voice started to escape.

He had no reason to oppose his thoughts.

He opened his mouth toward the heavens and released it.

He cried out. It was like the cry of a newborn baby.

His trembling vanished as if thrown off of him and his voice grew even louder.

“…!”

He twisted his body, bent forward, and arched backwards.

His body stretched toward the sky, breath passed from his lungs to his throat and his mouth, and he let out a cry .

His great roar tore into the gathering clouds in the sky.

Below the dark clouds and amid busy Shinjuku, Shinjou’s shoulders trembled at Sayama’s question.

“A cry?”

"Yes."

Sayama nodded and brushed up his hair in the wind.

He looked up into the sky with a calm expression. He spoke as if remembering something.

"People who struggle and people who fight will use their voice or their thoughts to raise a cry that is either voiced or silent. Just like Ooshiro Hiromasa did."

And…

"Just like 2nd-Gear is sure to do."

Shinjou gasped.

She remembered two things: what Ooshiro had told her about Kashima the night before and the past she had just seen.

…Will he make up his mind like Ooshiro-san's father did?

He would. She was sure of it. After all, he knew what power he held.

…But…

What about her?

She had no answer. The emotion that fact brought caused her to tremble.

"!"

She reflexively moved.

To reject the thought, she stood up and gathered her strength.

But…

"…"

When she realized what she had done, she looked over at Sayama who was looking up at her.

He gave her a questioning look which caused her to realize again what she had done.

"S-sorry. I'm not feeling well."

Her shoulders drooped and she took a breath.

And when she awkwardly sat back down, she heard Sayama speak.

"I can understand having difficulty getting over seeing that scene from the past, but it is not healthy to be so tense."

"I know…"

To keep him from realizing how shaken she was, she forced a smile and asked a question.

"Th-then do you have anything to talk about so I can get my mind off it?"

Sayama thought.

After a few seconds, he clapped his hands. On his head , Baku emulated the action. He then turned his head and Baku toward her.

"Then how about I once more invite you to the All Holiday Festival tomorrow?"

For just an instant, the word festival brought a look of joy to Shinjou's face.

But she quickly realized something and her shoulders trembled.

…I can't.

She frantically waved her hands toward Sayama.

"U-um, I have to train tomorrow, so…well…enjoy the festival with Setsu."

"That does sound nice, but…"

Sayama's halfhearted tone brought an immediate question out of Shinjou.

"Do you not like Setsu?"

"Of course I like him." He embraced the binder under his arm. "But I was asking if *you* would come."

"Ah," gasped Shinjou.

She realized what her question meant and what Sayama was thinking.

She realized his consideration and her reasons for rejecting it.

"…"

She did not know what expression was on her face.

Sayama's slightly frowning expression told her the answer: she was about to cry.

"Shinjou-kun."

"I-I'm sorry."

She stood up and took a step back.

She checked her watch and found it was just about to turn 5:40 PM.

"U-um, Sayama-kun. I…I'm not feeling well, so…I'll head back on my own."

Sayama's eyebrows moved.

He raised his head as if in realization and put on a serious expression.

"Given the subject matter, I will ask indirectly, but is it your perio-…gfh!"

Her knee struck his gut mid-sentence. He doubled over and she panicked further.

"S-sorry, but it slipped out because I think 'indirect' means something else."

"Heh…heh heh heh. That was an excellent attack, Shinjou-kun. And it was actually a repeat joke, so I suppose I deserved that. However…"

"Enough of that. For one thing, I still haven't started having a period."

"What a pain," he muttered.

But then his eyebrows moved. He formed a puzzled expression and spoke in a puzzled voice.

"You still haven't started?"

"Ah," said Shinjou when she realized what she had said.

…But it's true.

She held her own body to harden her defenses. She then took a deep breath so she could look him in the eye.

"Is that…strange?"

She felt it was strange, but she asked to be sure.

However, his answer was different. He straightened his tie and collar as he answered.

"It differs from person to person, so I cannot say anything one way or the other."

"I see."

Even as she nodded, Shinjou could tell her face had grown red.

What was she supposed to say here?

"Sorry I'm just a kid. But there's a reason for it… And I think that same reason is causing problems for you."

"Is this reason the lie you mentioned last night?"

"…Yes. But I can't say anything more."

Shinjou quietly nodded and then turned toward the station.

"If I say anything more now, I don't think I can stand it… But I do want to ask one thing. Will you let me ask a sudden question?"

"If you wish to ask it, go right ahead."

She had permission. That fact brought relief and she formed the words.

"I said I wanted you to go to the All Holiday Festival with Setsu, right? Well, I'm not sure how else to put this … Would you be fine if Setsu left?"

"…?"

"Don't give me that look. Your arm is healed now, right? And…and even if Setsu leaves, you still have Sadame…you still have me. So you don't need Setsu, right?"

Shinjou somehow managed to draw out the words which were sinking down in her gut.

"But right now – just for a bit – stay by Setsu's side."

That was all she could manage. She could not continue .

She glanced at his face and saw a slight look of surprise. That expression made her feel apologetic.

And so she turned her back, brought strength to her legs, and began walking.

“Sorry. …I’ll see you later! Later, okay!”

She immediately checked her watch and switched to a run.

Sayama stood up, but he could not make it in time.

She slipped into the crowd and between two women carrying large bags.

Something fell from the sky and landed on the shoulder of her jacket.

It was not an incendiary bomb that fell on her. Something else was falling on the world of the present.

“Rain.”

Chapter 18: Demand for Pain

Chapter 18

“Demand for Pain”

Will you bring yourself pain by seeking that which once caused you pain?
And what will you do about that which you once sought?

Will you bring yourself pain by seeking that which once caused you pain?

And what will you do about that which you once sought?

The curtain of night fell over the mountains of Okutama.

Beyond the UCAT facility was a world different from reality.

It was the 1st-Gear reservation. A space with a one kilometer radius was normally filled with greenery, but it could not be seen in the night.

Light spilled from the windows of the houses and temporary residences in the space and smoke rose from the chimneys on the roofs.

But one stone house in the center was a bit different.

It had no front wall. It appeared to have originally had one, but it had been destroyed.

Light filled the inside of that broken house.

Two people could be seen within: a half-dragon covered in a black shell and an old man wearing a lab coat.

They sat opposite each other on bamboo benches placed on the dirt floor.

Between them was a Go board covered in black and white Go pieces.

The half-dragon puffed out his chest and folded his arms while the old man leaned forward and stared at the game board.

The old man then placed a hand on his chin and spoke.

“Fasolt, I would be unbeatable if we were playing gunjin shogi.”

“When we did that, you dropped the landmine piece and it exploded, Ooshiro Kazuo.”

“Yeah, that caused a lot of damage. To me.”

Ooshiro sighed and Fasolt tilted his head.

"I hear the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear was progressing well."

"Y-you really like to get to the heart of the issue right away, don't you?"

"If a storyteller tells his story in a roundabout way, the truth will escape, Ooshiro Kazuo. That Sayama Mikoto and Shinjou are working on it, aren't they?"

"Shinjou-kun is the problem. You know about her lie, right?"

"I see," said Fasolt. "So she is thinking about revealing her lie to Sayama Mikoto?"

"How did you know?"

"It is the proper path for a story, Ooshiro Kazuo. A princess always possesses a secret."

"A princess? When did you start talking about fairy tales, Fasolt?"

Fasolt ignored that comment.

"Your father was involved in the destruction of 2nd-Gear and you cannot give them very much information, so you cannot get too involved with their issues here. Is that it?"

"Fasolt, you're great at summing things up." Ooshiro set down a Go piece. "But I also feel like I'm losing my nerve when it comes to my father."

"That proves you are young. Once you reach my age, you almost never hesitate."

"Really?"

"Really. The other day, Fafner made some unnecessary comments about his pulp production job, so I did not hesitate to deck him. That wall there was a victim of our little family battle. It makes me think hesitation might be a good thing."

Ooshiro turned toward the destroyed front wall of the house.

"I see you are living a fulfilling life. …So how is Fafner ?"

"He is performing the ceremony of repentance."

"The ceremony of repentance?"

"I tie a rope to him and hang him upside down off of the cliff out back for three days. That should get him to repent, but if he doesn't, I just have to swing him around real good and let him hang for another three days."

"That isn't repentance! That's forced mind alteration!"

Fasolt naturally ignored that comment and set down a Go piece.

"At any rate, the young have plenty of energy and a healthy amount of hesitation. 2nd-Gear has no long-lived types, so the young can hesitate and find their own answer while young." He let out a deep laugh. "But as a member of 1st-Gear, something else is bothering me. I heard an older group is on the move. German UCAT's strongest witch is here, isn't she?"

"You mean Diana-kun? As you know, she is Siegfried's niece, but…"

"I have heard the rumors, but I never thought that man's niece would help out 1st-Gear."

Ooshiro nodded.

"We live in a different age now. Anyway, it seems Diana-kun is interested in Team Leviathan."

"And?"

"She knows about UCAT's blank period. That should tell you all you need to know, right? Someone who knows a part of UCAT's past not even you know has returned to check on the Leviathan Road."

And…

"I do not know what she has been thinking for the past ten years, so I would like to give her an assistant who can keep an eye on her."

"In that case, I know the perfect person," confidently declared Fasolt. "1st-Gear has someone who will not be outdone by a German UCAT witch. Do not hesitate here, Ooshiro Kazuo. This is for the sake of that Sayama Mikoto and Shinjou of Team Leviathan which brought 1st-Gear to your side."

The design room in UCAT's second basement was suddenly filled with tension due to a single person.

That person was Kashima.

He was soaking wet. His white work uniform was dark with moisture and his usually orderly hair was dripping water and sticking to his face and neck.

His left arm held a thick waterproof envelope and his right hand was stained almost up the elbow with mud.

However, he did not seem to care. His wet footsteps continued straight forward.

He was headed for the very back of the room. The back wall contained a large projector and a single desk sat in front of it. This open space which was not divided off by a partition belonged to Tsukuyomi.

She had been staring at the photographs taken of Susaou, but she suddenly looked up.

She saw Kashima arrive from the entrance. She watched the source of the room's tension.

"Have you made up your mind, Kashima?"

She smiled as he approached her without nodding.

He remained silent, but his expression was composed and showed no hesitation or strength.

She nodded inwardly as she watched him. This was a good sign.

Suddenly, a young man stood up from a partition on the right.

The short haired man in a lab coat was an engineer who had only joined three years prior. His name was Mikami.

From what Tsukuyomi could remember, he had a poor impression of Kashima.

Mikami was a pure metal casting and swordsmithing family of 2nd-Gear. Back when the Gear still existed, the Kashima family had overtaken them and they had given up the position of #1 when it came to swords.

That was likely why Mikami was stopping Kashima.

With a single footstep, he quickly moved toward Kashima from the right.

"Manager Kashima, you should not carelessly enter the design room while soaking wet. We deal with fire and forging metal in this department, so-…"

He trailed off because of the look in Kashima's eyes.

Kashima did nothing but look at Mikami.

Nevertheless, Mikami lowered his hands and backed away.

No one laughed at Mikami's decision.

Silence fell once more, the tension grew, and Kashima continued toward Tsukuyomi.

His eyes held no strength, but they had not lost their strength either.

"Why are you here?" asked Tsukuyomi.

"The Leviathan Road between 2nd-Gear and Low-Gear will take place at this time in two days."

"How will it be carried out?"

As soon as she asked, the door to the design room opened and a song entered.

“Iiii am as strong as Ebolaaaa! Eeeeven if you bow down before me, you’ll shit out your large intestiiiine!”

All the others ducked back into their partitions out of fear. Atsuta had arrived.

Tsukuyomi saw Kashima fall silent and put on a grim expression.

“You sure are in a good mood, Atsuta. Why are you here?”

“Wait, why’re you here? I thought you quit and went home to grope your wife’s tits?”

Kashima gave an exasperated look and sighed as Atsuta walked up next to him.

He glanced over at Tsukuyomi and then back at Atsuta.

“You know, the work day isn’t over yet. Also, that was sexual harassment against my wife. Why are you here?”

"I have a good reason, but I'm not going to tell someone who keeps saying he's gonna quit. Keh."

"I am not quitting, so tell me."

"Are you messing with me? Try begging me to tell you ."

"Fine, fine. I beg you. Please tell me."

"I'm not gonna tell someone with no pride!"

"I really don't understand you. You haven't impressed me this much in a while."

"Is that so?" Atsuta nodded. "Well, whatever. I feel better now, so I'll give you a small blessing and tell you: it's the Leviathan Road."

Everyone peering out from their partitions frowned at that last term.

Everyone wondered what he was thinking and Kashima spoke on their behalf while scratching at his head.

"Oh, that's right. Back in the cafeteria, you said something about sticking with the Leviathan Road because of some girl you've fallen for."

"Well, there's that too. But in all my wisdom, I had a thought." Oblivious to everyone staring at him, Atsuta continued speaking. "Even if we've adapted to Low-Gear , why do we have to give our world's Concept Core to Team Leviathan so easily? Are we stronger than Low-Gear, are they stronger than us, or are we even? How can we hand over the Concept Core without knowing that?" He took a breath and gave a satisfied expression. "I won't accept it unless we settle that. And that goes for both the Concept Core and the girl I mentioned."

The first one to react was Kashima. He nodded.

"Director Tsukuyomi, this animal has given a surprisingly sound opinion to rationalize his personal grudge."

"D-damn you, Kashima! How can you say that about the brilliant opinion I just thought up in the bathroom!?"

"Quiet down," said Tsukuyomi as she looked behind Atsuta.

All of those poking their heads from the partitions had exasperated looks, but they were staring her way.

All of them seemed to agree with what Atsuta had said .

I see, she thought. *So they all had their reservations about this.*

"Okay, Atsuta. What do we have to do to convince you?"

"Hm," he thought. After a moment, he smiled. "How about a fight to the death!?"

"Don't say that with such a big smile, you idiot. If we kill them, UCAT will do more than just kick us out."

"Don't criticize my idea without giving one of your own." Atsuta clicked his tongue. "Okay. As a compromise, how about a mock battle? We do outdoor

training, right? We can do a large-scale version of that against those kids. If they can defeat us, we won't complain about releasing the concepts."

"A mock battle?" muttered Tsukuyomi as she looked behind him and Kashima.

The others all looked toward those two but finally turned silently back toward her.

There was strength in their gazes. They had all made up their own minds, but they were leaving the decision up to her.

And so she folded her arms behind her head and spoke.

"That could work."

"Oh, I actually got through to you!? This is an amazing discovery! Hey, Kashima, look at this! This woman's so old, but my modern Japanese still got through to her!"

"Director Tsukuyomi, this creature is always rude, but I ask for extra forgiveness this time."

"He can have it just this once," she said in annoyance before standing up, looking them in the eye, and nodding. "The place will be Showa Memorial Park's concept space. The method will be a mock battle. The victor will be decided by which side's representative takes Totsuka from where it sits on the bridge in Susaou's head. The reward will be the loser giving in to all of the victor's demands. …How does that sound?"

"You didn't even hesitate to say that… You already had this planned, didn't you?"

Instead of responding, Tsukuyomi merely smiled.

She already understood most of it.

The villain boy she had negotiated against earlier in the day had led her to make up her mind.

…So we are abandoning the status quo where we hope for peace no matter what.

"In that case, we will use this greatest method for winning our acceptance. Well? Any complaints?"

Atsuta shook his head in satisfaction and Kashima scratched at his head.

He looked troubled, but Tsukuyomi did not overlook the amused smile on his face.

"Hmm… Director Tsukuyomi, if you insist on that, I guess I have no complaints."

"So you're ready to do this?"

And…

"You intend to repair Futsuno and bring it back as 2nd-Gear's greatest sword?"

Atsuta gave a look of surprise next to Kashima, but Kashima ignored him and replied.

"Yes."

"W-wait, Kashima. Are you serious? I think you'd be happier groping your wife's tits."

"I would. And that is why I made the decision I did: I will make Futsuno *and* I will grope Natsu-san's breasts."

Kashima then thought for a second and tilted his head.

"Huh? That gave my determination a bit of a different nuance. It sounded somehow wild."

"No one cares, so start getting ready. Make the preparations you need to find all of your answers."

These two men are no different from children, thought Tsukuyomi with a bitter smile.

She then clapped her hands once toward the people peering out from the partitions.

"Okay, everyone! Go and give offerings to your ancestors and families tonight! Make sure you get a good grasp on your own name! It's a rainy night, so don't you think it will make for a sentimental scene?"

As the rain fell in the darkness, a certain train travelled west through Tokyo.

The train had left Shinjuku on the Keio Line and it stopped at every station on its way to Takaosanguchi.

The front-most car held relatively few people. It only contained two people carrying large paper bags.

One was Shino who wore a white T-shirt and a black dress. The other was Mikoku who wore a blue jacket and jeans.

Shino held a single paper bag, but Mikoku carried two larger bags as she sat to Shino's right. Mikoku also had another bag below her seat and one up in the luggage rack.

Mikoku's expression was serious as she sat with her back to the rain-covered window. She solemnly opened her mouth.

"Now, then. Our resupply mission was a success."

"You can't trick me by acting all serious! You even bought that fluffy pillow! You're a liar!"

"You are the one who said you wanted it."

"No, I didn't. I just said it looked comfy."

"That is the same thing," said Mikoku with a smile.

But Shino then saw the smile suddenly leave Mikoku's face.

Mikoku stared into the rain-filled darkness outside the window and the ends of her eyebrows lowered slightly.

She must have noticed Shino watching her because she asked her a question.

"Did you see that in Shinjuku?"

"Yes. We only passed by, but that was definitely Shinjou."

Shino recalled how their mouths had hung open and they had nearly started to cry when they passed by that person.

She averted her gaze from Mikoku, held the bag more tightly in her left hand, and touched Mikoku's arm with her right hand.

"It's no use… She doesn't remember us. She didn't notice us at all."

"Yes. It is just as we heard. She has no memories of her childhood."

"How about I speak with her next time. With my power-…"

"No. Using your power could put her on her guard."

"But…"

"It's okay. We will meet Shinjou eventually. I cannot say if that will be as an enemy or as an ally, though. Also, you saw who else was there, didn't you? That was Sayama Mikoto, my enemy." Mikoku shook her head a bit and sighed. "It is a difficult issue. Shinjou was crying in her heart. That Sayama may be able to stop those tears and he may not, but either way it will hurt me and make me hate him."

Sayama returned to his dorm in the rain.

As he walked through the dormitory hallway, his watch read 8:10 PM.

Shinjou always went to take a bath at four or five, he would study after that, and they would eat dinner in the school cafeteria no later than eight.

"I wonder if Shinjou-kun ate on his own."

Part of the problem was that Shinjou did not own a cell phone.

…But perhaps I should have called the dorm head so I could have a message passed on to him.

He hurried his legs toward his room. He found the door unlocked, so he opened it.

As the door opened smoothly, he saw the other side.

"It is dark?"

Not a single light was on and no one was in the room.

…Where is Shinjou-kun?

Just as he started panicking, Baku suddenly poked out of Sayama's breast pocket and pointed his head toward the bed.

Wondering what that was about, Sayama looked over and spotted a figure sleeping in the bottom bunk.

It was Shinjou.

Why is he asleep so early? wondered Sayama. *Perhaps the stomachache from earlier today came back.*

Sayama closed the door and walked over to the window in the dark.

He placed the binder and Baku on his own desk.

As he did, he heard rustling cloth and turned to find a white shirt sitting up in the darkness.

"Sayama…-kun?"

"Sorry. Did I wake you?"

"No. You can turn on the lights."

"No need," said Sayama as he crouched down next to the bed.

He found a weak expression there.

As he observed Shinjou's eyes, he suddenly realized the area around his eyes was a bit red.

…Has he been crying?

But he asked about something else instead.

"Do you need anything? If you need any food, I can bring it to you."

"No," said Shinjou again while frowning a bit.

He looked down and lightly held the bottom of his stomach which was hidden by the blanket.

He also continued speaking before Sayama could do anything.

"Don't worry. It will go away by tomorrow morning. I hope it's sunny for the All Holiday Festival."

"Yes, we can enjoy the festival together."

"Yes…. Um, Sayama-kun?"

"What is it?"

"Did you read the plot I gave you today?"

Sayama was at a loss for words. After being given the plot, he had headed out to work and had only just arrived back.

There was no way he could have read it yet.

…That must be how important it is to him.

His thoughts brought silence. When Shinjou realized what that silence meant, the ends of his eyebrows lowered.

"Sorry. I asked too much of you."

"Not at all."

…Saying I was busy sounds like too much of an excuse.

But it was true he could not have taken his time to properly read it. He felt that was important.

"I apologize for now, but if you will allow it, I would like some time."

"Some time? Why?"

"Yesterday, you said you wanted me to know you." Sayama directly spoke the words in his heart. "Just as you are trying to convey yourself to me, I want the time and resolution to face you properly."

"And if you have that, you'll read it?'

"Yes, I will read it."

"But I might leave tomorrow."

Shinjou's right hand grabbed Sayama's left sleeve.

He held it, but he quickly let go and slowly pulled his hand back.

He groaned a bit and lightly bent over.

He then relaxed his body and slipped back under the blanket butt-first while continuing to look at Sayama.

"Sorry."

Shinjou hid even his head under the blanket and there was nothing Sayama could do.

He considered reading the plot now, but he decided against reading it in this atmosphere.

…That would be rushing things and trying to avoid the issue.

With that thought, he suddenly stopped moving.

He heard Shinjou suppress another groan at the precise moment he felt a pain in his own chest.

Wondering where this pain came from, he suddenly recalled an old memory.

Long ago, he had felt a pain in his stomach during the night.

Everyone experienced that sort of stomachache while a child whose body had yet to fully develop.

It brought definite pain to the one feeling it, but those around them would act as if it was nothing and it would indeed disappear by the next morning.

He thought back to then. His parents had been around back then, but what had they done?

The pain in his chest grew as he tried to think back, but he had to do it.

"Nn…"

Shinjou's groan caused Sayama to quickly place his right hand on the left side of his chest.

There was something he had to do as a villain.

Chapter 19: Night of Compensation

Chapter 19

“Night of Compensation”

What should I say?
I cannot tell the truth no matter what
The more I want to, the more I hesitate

What should I say?

I cannot tell the truth no matter what

The more I want to, the more I hesitate

In a small living room, the sounds of a late-night television show played quietly.

This was the Kashima household's living room.

Two people watched the television while listening to the faint sound of rain from outside.

They were Kashima and Natsu who was leaning up against him.

They sat on cushions and had a table in front of them.

The table contained two sake bottles and two matching sake cups.

"I see you liked the stir-fried sandlance."

Kashima suddenly realized he kept bringing his chopsticks back to the bowl of small fish.

"The trick is to separately cook the sandlance and the fried tofu in bonito sauce and mix it together later."

He did not know what effect that had, but the number of fish he had grabbed said plenty.

"It goes well with the sake."

He took a sip of the sake they rarely brought out.

He then recalled last night's dinner.

The main dish had been a squash and adzuki bean dish with boiled bamboo shoots wrapped in cured ham.

It had all come together well with the rice and miso soup.

He felt so much better when at home.

It helped that he had someone precious by his side.

Being with her made him feel like he was slowly working through the thoughts which had been bothering him.

Something new filled the place where he had trembled in fear in front of the 3rd Production Room.

What had he chosen?

Everything will be okay, he thought as he went back over his thoughts.

But would Natsu realize where his thoughts were? She carried her thick sake cup to her mouth and laughed quietly in a cat-like voice.

Kashima smiled at that and poured more sake into her cup.

"Oh, Akio-san. Why are you trying to get me drunk? Are you plotting something?"

"I enjoy watching you drink more than drinking myself."

"Really?" she asked as she took another drink and laughed again.

She then held up her cup.

"Do you remember this? It is from the school trip in our fourth year."

"Yes. That was when the seminar students were forced to march as slaves in the name of an excavation trip in Inawashiro, wasn't it? You caused a huge commotion when you got heatstroke."

"Th-that was my punishment for trying to show off. When I was being sent back to Tokyo, you ran up to me on the platform and gave me this."

"Your fath-…The professor was a strict person. I thought it was wrong to force you back home without even a souvenir."

Kashima smiled bitterly as he remembered. He had simply been worried about her, but he had needed an excuse back then. He decided now he should tell her what his true reasons had been.

He tried to tell her he had been worried about her.

“…”

But he stopped.

Telling her the truth about that would change nothing in the present.

She was currently observing the thick sake cup in her hand.

"That was quite funny, thinking back. You said you had a souvenir for me, but you handed me this which you can buy at any store. So I asked you why you got me this." She gave a smile that did not reach her eyes. "And you told me you wanted something that would not break if I dropped it because I can be careless. Of course, there are plenty of other things that would have worked."

And…

"You were in quite a rush, weren't you?"

Wow, thought Kashima as he shrank down. *She's got me there.*

"That was all I saw at the time. But I never expected you to give me the exact same gift in return after summer break."

He lightly held up the sake cup in his hand. It was just as thick as hers.

"You got it on some short trip, didn't you? Your family can be demanding about that kind of thing."

"I was glad to do it because I wanted to give you something in thanks. But I can be careless, so I wanted to get something I wouldn't drop and break before I could give it to you."

…What a horrible way of returning the favor.

Kashima could find nothing to say in response to her smile, so he scratched at his head.

Natsu then nodded wordlessly.

"But my worries were unneeded." She held up her cup in her left hand. "After all, you were willing to take something even after it had been dropped and broken."

Still smiling, she drew back a bit.

I see, thought Kashima when he saw that. *I made her worry.*

He had made his wife bring up the topic he should have headed toward himself. That topic being his true feelings regarding the past.

And so he nodded and spoke.

“Natsu-san.”

“Yes?” she said while politely sitting next to him and lowering the television’s volume with the remote. “Is it about your job?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“I do not really know anything about this. I do not know what is causing that uncertain expression of yours or that secretiveness of late. But…that is what lets me know it is related to your job.”

“Have I been worrying you?”

“No. I know you will always ultimately discuss it with me or apologize. After you suddenly bought that expensive video camera, you spent a month bowing down to me and coming home at a normal time every day.”

"Well, a lot of that was because I wanted to *use* the video camera… But whatever."

They exchanged a glance and smiled at each other.

After a breath, Natsu brought her hands to her chest.

"It's okay. I have been drinking, so if I start crying, I can blame it on the alcohol."

"You're quite prepared." Kashima led that statement smoothly into his next. "Can I have about two days? I need to stay over at work to finish an important job. To be honest, I think I won't want to be in contact with anyone outside the office. And after that…"

"This will happen again from time to time, won't it? You will occasionally prioritize your work over your home."

Hearing that, he looked up.

Natsu had her hands against her chest in a way that looked somewhat protective.

…She knows what I am about to say.

And so he nodded without hesitation.

“That is correct,” he said clearly.

“I see,” she said with slightly lowered eyebrows. “Then I will return to the family home while you are gone.”

Someone moved in the darkness.

It was Shinjou as he awoke under the blanket.

After speaking with Sayama at around eight, he had passed out due to pain.

How much time had passed? It felt like an instant, but it could have been hours. He wanted for it to be morning, but the darkness and silence outside the blanket told him it was the middle of the night.

The odd feeling in his stomach remained, but he felt warmth all across his body as he lay curled up while facing the left.

The blanket must have been holding in the heat well because he was not feeling cold at all.

The pain should leave soon, he thought in relief.

He took a breath, the tension left him, and his pulse sounded louder than before. He could feel sweat on his brow, but he did not want to move his hands from his body. It was improper, but he tried to rub his forehead against the sheet to wipe off the sweat.

"…Eh?"

He suddenly realized his head lay on something like a pillow.

His head was drawn under the blanket, so his head could not be on his pillow.

Wondering what this pillow-like object was, he raised his head.

The cool air outside the blanket touched his face and his night vision told him what it was.

"Sayama-kun?"

Sayama was sleeping while lightly embracing Shinjou.

His right arm passed below Shinjou's left cheek and around Shinjou's back. His left arm was wrapped around Shinjou's right shoulder and also wrapped around Shinjou's back.

Shinjou remained silent while held in Sayama's arms. He more strongly held his own left-facing body and curled up even tighter.

He had seen this composition before. A verse of a song he knew had been made into a painting and that painting showed a holy mother embracing her crying child.

"Christ the Savior is here…"

What is he doing? wondered Shinjou as he muttered a line of the song.

But he knew why that holy mother was embracing her child.

…This is what you do when someone important to you cries.

The feeling of that left hand on his back seemed to bring back a memory of the past.

He had a memory of someone lightly patting his back while he was suffering.

Was this a memory of what Sayama had done just now or was it a memory of Shinjou's forgotten mother?

It doesn't matter, he thought. *Either way, it is a welcome memory.*

Shinjou realized Sayama's left arm was pinched in at the shoulder a bit.

When Sayama recalled the past, he would bring his right hand to the left side of his chest.

But right now, that arm was being used as Shinjou's pillow. In that case, what did it mean that his left arm was pinched in like that?

Sorry, he thought. *His mother must have done this for him.*

Shinjou nodded and looked next to the head of the bed .

The alarm clock said it was just before twelve.

Had Sayama been embracing him for the entire four hours since he had passed out?

…Sorry.

Sayama's expression as he slept was different than the one he had when Shinjou would wake him in the morning.

It was the peaceful expression of someone who had completed a job. He accepted the pain in his chest as normal.

…I need to reconsider my actions.

Before, he had left everything up to his pain, hinted that he would disappear, and tried to force his plot on Sayama.

"Why did I do that?"

…He will eventually read my plot even if I hadn't done that.

Shinjou pressed his forehead against Sayama's chest.

"What do you think about me?"

He closed his eyes.

"What will you think about me once you learn my lie?"

Kashima immediately reacted to Natsu's comment about returning to the family home.

He had expected to hear her say that. She was here because he was here. So if he left…

"That would be best."

"Yes. It has been a while since I was there, so it should cause some confusion at first."

"Yeah."

But her father drew picture books and loved children. If she brought Harumi with her, he would not scold her or refuse to let her in.

"There will probably be a lot of cleaning to do."

That was true. Kashima had heard Natsu's room was untouched from when she had let.

…This is going to be a lot of trouble for her.

She must have realized what he was thinking because she nodded and spoke.

"But it is about time for them to be planting the rice, isn't it? I like doing that."

"Eh?"

"What? Why are you so confused?"

"Wait a minute, Natsu-san. When you said you would return to the family home, where exactly did you mean?"

"I meant your mother and father's house, of course."

She tilted her head as she answered and Kashima felt his strength leave him.

He collapsed backwards and sprawled out on the floor . Tatami mats were horribly cool and comfortable at times like this.

"Ah," said Natsu as she realized something. "S-sorry. But…um…I am Kashima Natsu now."

"No, I was the one that jumped to the wrong conclusion. I guess you could call both of them the family home."

"I-I can't believe you. I am not the kind of wife that would do that."

"No, you're not. You're really not," he said as he sat back up.

He crossed his legs and faced forward where Natsu was blushing and giving a troubled expression. He sighed.

"I guess they won't complain if you suddenly show up ."

"I actually called them today. They hinted that they were shorthanded for planting the rice, so I thought I would go help if you were leaving for a while." She stared at him. "They should give us some rice, so I can go , right?"

"I get the feeling my parents are bribing my wife with food… But what about Harumi?"

"Your mother says she will teach me a new way to hold her. It apparently involves supporting her on my back with a sash. I will probably get to hear how she carried you around like that."

"Sorry, but I think I'm going to buy a hidden microphone tomorrow. Please let me monitor what they say."

He smiled bitterly. He felt bad for Natsu's family, but this was better for him.

He almost apologized out loud, but he stopped himself .

"Anyway, Natsu-san."

"Yes?"

"I know this is a lot of trouble for you, but I still can't tell you about my job."

He slowly reached out and took Natsu's left hand. That hand was missing the ring and little fingers. He enclosed the remaining fingers in his hands and she asked a question.

"That means you are lying to me in the sense that you are hiding the truth, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I have been ever since I took your hand like this for the first time."

"Then for this upcoming job are you returning to who you were before you took my hand?"

"Yes. I will return to the person I was before I left the university and met you on that rainy night."

"I see," she said as she tilted her head a bit.

She took a breath, smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered, and asked another question.

"Does this job have anything to do with this hand of mine?"

Kashima responded clearly to Natsu's question and the gaze she directed straight at him.

"It does. But I can't say any more than that."

"I see," she said again before biting her lower lip for a few seconds.

But she did not lower her head. She continued staring straight at him and asked yet another question.

"But things will remain the same at home, right?"

"They will. Just as before, I will continue to lie."

Natsu's expression changed. She formed a smile with lowered eyebrows and lowered her head.

"Please do. And do not apologize. Do not sacrifice yourself for the life Harumi and I have."

Before she could use her right hand to wipe her eye, he let go of her other hand.

He used his own hands to wipe both of her cheeks.

She narrowed her eyes and took a single rough breath.

“Akio-san, I don’t know, do I?’

“Know what?”

“I… I married you without fully knowing you, so it would be a problem if you did not continue lying.”

Natsu’s words caused Kashima to tense up.

Seeing that, she raised her head and spoke in a mischievous voice.

“And I lie to you too, you know?”

“You do?”

Her teary face smiled a bit.

“Yes. About my childhood, about my mischief and romantic relationships as a student, about my parents, and about my relationships with people at my workplace now. I…I lie a lot too.”

Tears spilled from her arched eyes.

"You're such a liar, Akio-san. You're Yamato Takeru."

"Th-that's kind of ominous. According to the legend, didn't Yamato Takeru's wife Ototachibana-hime drown herself to calm a storm?"

"Yes, but a liar's wife will of course be a liar. She drowned herself, but she did not actually want that. That is why there is more to the story."

"Eh?"

Natsu grabbed Kashima's hands as he wiped away her tears.

"Yamato Takeru searched for her and found her washed up on a certain beach. That beach was named Soga because she was brought back to life there. That beach is in Chiba, near Tokyo." She took a breath. "Soga means to resurrect oneself. That is just like the two of us, isn't it?"

"…"

"And afterwards, Yamato Takeru continued his work and died of fatigue. But neither he nor his wife died while lost in their lies. The world is a harsh place. But try not to work yourself to death."

She raised her head and the motion caused some tears to fall from the corners of her eye. She then smiled once more.

"Now, I have a request for our family's Great God Kashima and Yamato Takeru."

"What is it, our family's Ototachibana-hime and crybaby wife?"

"Oh, my."

Natsu blushed, but her expression quickly calmed down.

"You can work if you like. You can lie if you like. You can get wrapped up in late-night violence with that delinquent Atsuta-san and his motorcycle if you like." She took a breath. "But please always return home."

He had a single answer. He very nearly said “ testament”, but caught himself.

“I promise.”

He embraced her, took her left hand, and gently kissed it.

“Ah.”

She looked troubled, but brought the missing part of her hand toward his mouth.

The stumps of the two fingers had slight depressions due to the wrinkles.

When he pecked at them, she laughed quietly.

As he licked her scars, she trembled a bit and spoke.

“For me, this place – including the lies – is the truth.”

Her outstretched hand tasted of sweat which slightly resembled the flavor of blood.

She had appeared calm as they had spoken, but she must have been nervous.

The same as me, thought Kashima as he held her firmly in his left arm.

She would be able to hear his pulse now.

"I will return home and I will not apologize. That alone is most definitely not a lie."

"Thank you."

Natsu looked up even though her eyes were closed and he removed his mouth from her hand.

He would do what he must do where he was wanted.

He once more heard the sound of rain from outside.

"Akio-san."

"What is it?"

He looked over at her, but she was smiling without fearing the rain.

“I feel bad doing this to Haru-chan.”

She made a quiet request.

“But can you give a little of your time to only me?”

Chapter 20: Intent to Escape

Chapter 20

“Intent to Escape”

What do you call it when you flee despite having nowhere to escape to?
Is it parting ways?
Or is it being cornered?

What do you call it when you flee despite having nowhere to escape to?

Is it parting ways?

Or is it being cornered?

The morning of the festival was overall noisy.

The All Holiday Festival was handled by the different committees, the different circles, and the volunteers from the classes.

A lot of students were taking part because the school had no classes on Sunday, but the morning of the first day was still used for preparations.

Music played from music players and other speakers around the school. Sounds of mic tests and hammering could also be heard and bicycles and motorcycles with trailers could be seen transporting materials.

Amid it all, Shinjou hung his head next to a row of trees warmed by the sun.

Sayama was walking him around to the different stands and introducing them, but not much of it was entering his head.

There were a few different reasons for this.

When he had woken up at around seven that morning, he had been embracing Sayama.

His waking had woken Sayama who had noticed what Shinjou was doing.

Sayama had assured him it was fine, but then…

"We were seen."

After Harakawa had brought in the materials for their stand using his motorcycle, he and their other classmates had stopped by their room. They would have normally contacted Ooki, but she had been late as usual.

…They looked so surprised.

They had explained the situation and Harakawa himself had seemed to accept it.

But the others had apparently spread the rumor. When they had left the dorm and when they had eaten at the cafeteria, they had been interviewed by the gossip newspaper which was one of the school's multiple newspaper clubs.

…Sayama-kun responded to them so easily.

He had merely insisted it was nothing to worry about.

However, Shinjou still felt he had caused trouble for him.

And that kind of rumor had a way of sticking around.

…He is already known as the eccentric student council vice president who is well known for doing odd things.

Izumo had been absent, so Sayama had handled the opening ceremony.

It depressed Shinjou to remember the slander and jeers a few people had shouted.

"Want one?"

Something was held out into his downturned vision. It resembled a large dried plum and was held with a pair of chopsticks. It was wrapped in what looked like clear glass.

"What is this?"

"H-have you never seen an apricot candy before? This is… This is a shocking revelation."

"Wh-why do you have to wiggle around and give such an over-the-top reaction?"

"I see. Then how about we both calm down? …Listen. This candy is the festival's must-have item."

"Really? Are things like this needed at a festival?"

"Yes. There are other similar items such as the plastic bag containing a goldfish you stole from a tank or the blade-carved ice with carcinogens placed on top. And at the center of it all is the wooden tower playing bewitching music that everyone repeatedly circles around while dancing in a trancelike state. Ventura! Ventura!"

"I have a feeling your descriptions aren't entirely accurate…"

Shinjou tilted his head and licked the candy.

"It's sweet. I thought it would be sour."

"The outside is nothing but a sugary syrup. It is hard because it was placed in ice. The trick is to eat the whole thing after licking it down a little bit."

Shinjou nodded and started to pull out his change purse, but Sayama stopped him.

"No need to pay. The first year girl at that stand gave it to me for free. She told me to 'do my best'. I am impressed that first years these days are trying to form connections with the student council by bribing them with food."

"I am 100% sure that is not what she meant. What did you say in return?"

"I said I would give it my very best effort, so leave it to me. She gave an excited scream, so I think she might have a brain disease."

"Ahh…"

Shinjou held his head in his hands.

"What is it, Shinjou-kun? A headache? If you do not eliminate the cause, headaches can be dangerous."

"I don't want to hear that from the source of the danger," he muttered while staring into empty space.

He then heard the sound of an engine behind him.

He turned around and saw a large black motorcycle with a sidecar. Harakawa was driving it. The brown-skinned boy with wavy black hair lowered his sunglasses.

"Hey."

He stopped the motorcycle next to them.

The boy may have had difficulty telling Japanese people apart because he treated everyone in the class the same. He even acted casually around Sayama who everyone else kept some distance from.

"What is it, Harakawa? Are you about to leave?"

"Yeah. The automobile research club's all set up, so I'm on my way to meet my mother and then head to my job in Yokota."

"Tightening bolts and sorting old books? Do your best. …Oh, and how are your new club members?"

"There's this one perverted kid who wants to get a sidecar a girl can ride in. I like his style. And we'll probably get more people after the demonstration during the festival."

"Demonstration? What's that?"

"Oh, no one's told you, Shinjou? Well, first we drive our motorcycles side by side along the rows of trees at the main entrance."

"Okay."

"Then we all shout 'our budget was too small and we couldn't maintain our brakes!' and charge into the school building."

"That's illegal! Sayama-kun, don't you have something to say about this?"

"Do not try to run up the stairs. Last year, there were some motorcycles flying off the roof, but I do not think it was a stunt."

"We were targeting the motocross crowd. Preventing the front suspension from bottoming was hard."

"I'm starting to see why this school is so strange," commented Shinjou.

"Yes. Even someone practically brimming over with common sense like me has difficulty understanding a lot about this school."

"S-sorry, but if you're 'brimming over with common sense', how much do you think I have?"

"You? Common sense? I distinctly remember you asking what 'that spinning square thing' was when I turned on the game system in the dorm room. How can you not know about the rule of spinning polygons?"

"B-but it really was the first time I'd seen something like that…"

As Shinjou lowered his head, Harakawa sighed.

"Well, you could say this school gathers people with a strange sort of common sense."

"I-I'm not strange."

"Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, that is what all the strange people say."

"Sayama-kun, I'm pretty sure I'm the one that's supposed to say that."

Harakawa smiled bitterly and gathered attention on himself again.

"More importantly, I'm sorry about this morning, Shinjou Setsu."

"Oh, um, it's fine. It was an accident and you actually let us explain. And if you're going to apologize, apologize to Sayama-kun. I'll be leaving the school before long."

"Really? That's news to me."

Harakawa turned toward Sayama, but Shinjou could not bring himself to do the same.

"Yes, it is true."

When Sayama did not deny it, Shinjou gave an emotionless nod.

"Also, Harakawa-kun, I don't want to leave any misunderstandings behind. The one Sayama-kun is interested in…"

Shinjou paused.

"Yes. The one Sayama-kun is interested in isn't me. It's my sister…unfortunately."

He casually added the "unfortunately".

Ah, gasped Shinjou in his heart.

He probably should not have said that. For Sayama's sake and for his own sake.

To avoid any questioning from Sayama, he lowered his head.

But the one to take action was Harakawa. While facing Sayama, he nodded and poked at his shoulder.

"…"

He seemed to be reprimanding Sayama for something and he wordlessly drove off on his motorcycle afterwards.

The engine sounds slowly but surely grew more distant. Meanwhile, Shinjou bit into the apricot candy to stall for time. Some sourness joined the sweetness, but it was so little he had to focus on it to notice.

"Shinjou-kun."

The voice he had dreaded arrived.

Wondering what he was going to ask brought a certain emotion.

…I'm scared.

Would he seek some kind of conclusion here?

"Are you still feeling unwell?"

It took Shinjou the span of two breaths to understand the unexpected question and then he thought on it.

An answer floated up in his heart and he spoke it while looking toward the ground.

“I don’t know.”

終わりのクロニクル

"You do not know?"

"I don't know what I should do. I'm scared and I keep thinking only about myself."

Having Sayama embrace him had brought such relief the night before, but now he felt he should avoid that.

…What look is on my face right now?

"This is a weird question, but…Sayama-kun, are you interested in boys?"

"No, I am not. I am normal in that sense."

"I see."

Shinjou gave a weak nod and Sayama tilted his head.

Sayama's gaze held concern, so Shinjou spoke up before he could say anything.

"Th-then… How do you feel about Shinjou Sadame?"

It took Sayama a moment to answer that testing question. He remained as expressionless as ever.

"She is important to me."

"Yes," said Shinjou. "I suppose she would be."

He nodded and his vision grew distorted.

"Sadame is a girl and you are a boy. You don't care about people seeing us this morning because you will choose Sadame. You…You can't choose me, can you?"

"Shinjou-kun."

He tried to say "What?", but different words came out.

"Sorry, I don't want to hear it."

Sayama held out his hand and Shinjou twisted out of its way a moment later.

He turned his back to Sayama and lowered his head. The distortion to his vision fell to the ground.

He looked forward where a path led away from the school. A sudden breeze blew in.

"Sorry. I need to go calm down a bit."

Shinjou ran forward and away from the school. He ran as far away from Sayama's words as he could.

"Shinjou-kun!"

Shinjou did not turn back toward the voice. He heard footsteps pursuing him, but a group of elementary students visiting the school crossed their path and blocked the way for Sayama.

Shinjou took a breath, straightened up, and passed through the school's gate.

…I just did something I shouldn't have.

Sayama was surrounded by the elementary students pressing in from the front gate.

He saw Shinjou turn a distant corner and disappear.

"Shinjou-kun! …What is with this crowd of children!?"

"With this many, it's hard to lead them around."

Sayama turned to the side and found Ooki scratching her head amid the sea of children.

"So it is our tardy teacher who is in charge of them. You appear unable to move, so when did you appear next to me?"

"I was just caught in the flow."

"I am glad to see you are the same as always. Now, what is with these children?"

"On the way here, the head of a children's home asked me to take the children to the festival since I was already late. I am quite popular, you see."

"So even the children's homes know my homeroom teacher is always late."

"If possible, I would like to hear what you have to say about my popularity."

Sayama ignored her.

He looked around and found a stomach-height crowd staring intently up at him.

"Anyway, Ooki-sensei. Why did you use these children to block my path?"

"When I arrived, I saw you and Shinjou-kun were playing a game of tag, so I had them join in and…ow ow ow!"

"Was it the brain inside this skull that had such an idiotic thought?"

Once Sayama gave Ooki a red spot, the elementary school students began swarming around them.

"D-don't be mean to her!!"

"Do not let her fool you! She is a bad person!"

His decisive shout brought the children to a halt. They all stared up at them.

"A-a bad person?"

"N-no! Sayama-kun, why are you calling your teacher a bad person!?"

"Oh? Bring your hands to your heart and think very carefully. Have you never once done anything bad?"

Ooki brought her hands to her chest and thought.

"Um…" She tilted her head for several seconds and finally smiled without any further hesitation. "No, not once."

"Under the Sayama code of law, lying is punishable by death. Are you sure you do not want to reconsider?"

Sayama glared at her with half-closed eyes, but someone suddenly called out behind them.

"Why are you people getting so worked up in the morning? You're blocking the way."

He turned around to find Brunhild standing beyond the children.

The art club's stand sat on the sidewalk behind her.

It was shaped like a Venus de Milo measuring over ten meters tall. The statue was created with an increased bust and had a grilled chicken stand embedded in the stomach. Green smoke blew from the nose up above.

Brunhild smiled toward the children.

"Welcome."

The black cat on her shoulder meowed and the children drew back.

As the group of children moved away like a receding wave, Sayama stepped forward.

"I thank you."

"No need. Having them gathered here would affect sales. More importantly, are you preparing for 2nd-Gear's Leviathan Road?"

"Did Kazami or one of the others tell you?"

"No. …Izumo is absent today, isn't he? Have you heard why?"

"No. Kazami merely said he fell from the rooftop yesterday."

"That sounds like one of her excuses. …From what I hear, they were doing some kind of training on the roof last night. She said they had figured out the trick to something, but Izumo had to sleep because of an injury."

Sayama gave a bitter smile. That training had likely been to find a countermeasure for 2nd-Gear's Art of Walking.

But he had nothing to say about the fact that they had not told him.

"They probably had another strange idea."

"What will you do? Will you head to UCAT where your runaway friend's sister is?"

"Yes, that is my plan. I have other business in Okutama, too. I was about to ask the dormitory head to call me if Setsu-kun returns and then speak with Sadame-kun at UCAT."

"Speak about what?"

"About why I must be looked down on like this."

"Eh?"

Brunhild's questioning voice and expression elicited a bitter smile from Sayama.

"It seems Shinjou…Setsu-kun does not want to hear what I have to say."

"There are times like that."

"But I cannot stand it. And…I doubt that is what he truly wants."

Sayama spoke his true feelings to the girl he had once fought.

"Who else is going to listen to what I have to say?"

"Don't be so humble. Someone from 1st-Gear who listened to you is standing right here."

"Do not misunderstand. I made you and your Gear listen by force. But with Shinjou-kun…both Shinjou-kun's, I want them to listen of their own free will."

"You have a serious case of just about every illness I can think of."

"That is fine by me. They say overcoming all kinds of illness leads to good fortune. …The time has come for me to decide how to face them."

"Then what will you do now?" asked Brunhild.

Suddenly, the left side of Sayama's chest vibrated.

It was his cell phone.

He pulled Baku from his pocket and then grabbed his phone.

"It is me."

"Sayama-sama? This is Sibyl of Team Leviathan. Do you have a moment?"

"Testament. What is it?"

"2nd-Gear has announced the details of the Leviathan Road. The time and place are 8 PM tomorrow in the concept space within Showa Memorial Park. 2nd-Gear's representatives will carry out joint training with Team Leviathan and its support units. The victor will be the one to acquire Totsuka from the bridge in Susaou's head. Simply put, it will be a mock battle. What do you think?"

"So the military god has finally made up his mind."

"I predicted you would say something like that."

Sayama frowned at the hint of enjoyment in her voice.

"Did the others give different comments?" he asked.

"A few, but one person said the same thing you did."

"Who was that?"

"Ooshiro Itaru-sama."

Sayama gulped.

Why him? he wondered as Sibyl continued.

"Please come to UCAT soon. We must exchange the necessary paperwork and I will prepare the documents related to 2nd-Gear."

"Testament," replied Sayama before putting away his phone.

He looked up and found Brunhild looking at him.

"You are going to UCAT, then? I have business there as well."

"To visit the 1st-Gear reservation? Send my regards to Fasolt and Fafner."

"That family has recently seriously tried to create pulp from kitchen waste. It smells too bad to get anywhere near their house. And they got into a serious fight and partially destroyed that house recently."

"Who knew giant monsters were battling so close to home?"

"Yes," said Brunhild. "But you mentioned a military god, didn't you? The god-class members of each gear are powerful. Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"This military god wants us to face him. And if you recall, I once faced a girl who was the god of the underworld and a dragon who could only be defeated with a holy sword. Nevertheless, here I am alive."

"Not only are you foolish, you're full of yourself, too."

"I will take that as a compliment. It was someone who was referred to that way that defeated a god. …And I already know that the ones I am facing now are as formidable an enemy as you were."

"I see." Brunhild nodded and expressionlessly continued. "If you have not forgotten that, then I am still the god of the underworld. …But I am one who is no longer opposing you."

"Then shall we go to UCAT together? I plan to head over once the afternoon group takes over here."

Brunhild began to nod, but someone suddenly flipped her skirt up.

"…!"

She turned around to find one of the elementary kids from before. A boy in shorts was smiling at her.

"Yay! It's the coldhearted girl's panti-…gwoh!"

"Hm. Starting out with an iron claw? Rather harsh, don't you think?"

"Sorry, Sayama. I'll head to UCAT on my own after dealing with this kid."

Ooki frantically ran over.

"Ahhh! I'm sorry, Brunhild-san! There are just too many energetic and perverted children!"

"Don't worry about it. No one will be left to worry about it."

"D-don't say such ominous things with that cement-like face!"

As Ooki panicked, Brunhild smiled and pointed toward the stand behind her.

"Want to see it? Don't worry. …I'll convince you."

On the north end of Akigawa was a cemetery on a mountain near Oume.

A sign reading Nishitama Cemetary and a pair of guests stood at the entrance.

Walking below the midday sun was a man and woman wearing black. They both had white hair.

One was Ooshiro Itaru and the other was Sf.

As he climbed the stairs to the cemetery, Itaru held his cane in one hand and a bouquet of chrysanthemums in the other.

Next to him, Sf held up a bucket of water in her right hand.

“Itaru-sama, should I carry the flowers for you?”

“Oh? How surprisingly considerate. Do you want to carry them that much?”

“No, not really.”

“Then I will have you carry them.”

Itaru handed Sf the flowers. She placed them in the bucket of water and looked around.

Tombstones were lined up along the mountain slope and a path continued on between them.

“I have determined this is an incomprehensible place.”

“Why?”

"Tes. If this megalithic culture was capable of constructing such ley lines, why was it destroyed?"

"It looks like your brain is tuned to some special program. …Remember this: the culture that made this is very much alive. It has not been destroyed. Also, this has nothing to do with ley lines."

"So it is a graveyard? In that case, I have concluded it is all the more incomprehensible."

Sf once more looked across the gravestones.

"If people felt strongly enough about the people to set up gravestones, why did they place them so far outside the city? If you have strong feelings, wouldn't you place them nearby? I cannot make any sense of it, so I have determined the answer is based on emotions."

"There are some things you feel are important and have strong feelings about but want to put at a distance. …You don't understand that?"

"Tes. I cannot understand the actions of distancing something or distancing yourself from something."

"Is that so?"

"Tes. For example, ever since I was activated in Japan, I have not left a 100 meter radius of you. I have been monitoring your heartbeat, breathing, and body temperature in real time."

"Oh? I see the Germans install extreme stalker protocols in their machines. I had always thought a maid and her master kept a fair bit of distance, but maybe I was imagining it."

"That is not something I can understand without emotions."

"I see, I see."

Itaru came to a stop at the top of the staircase.

The graveyard lay on a gentle downward slope in front of him.

As he walked forward, Sf continued alongside him.

"My memory says we have been here once before. It was on the way back that we met Sayama-sama."

"Don't remind me."

"Tes. I choose a bow from my different apology options."

Itaru stopped walking and Sf lowered her head.

A few seconds later, she began to raise her head, but something struck it.

"Itaru-sama, a chop has struck the back of my head."

"It's a form of silent communication. Doing things like this is fine from time to time."

"Tes. But I have determined this was not your idea."

"Oh, have you?"

He removed his hand and she adjusted her hair decoration.

"Tes. Unless you are troubled, you would not choose to touch me."

"You remember too damn much."

"Tes. My ability to brighten my master's day with as-yet-unknown features is what makes me the secret masterpiece of German UCAT. Please look forward to what you will discover in the future. …Should I add a catchy comment at the end?"

"I would love it if you said 'die' or 'go to hell' with a smile."

"Tes."

Sf bowed, suddenly stopped moving, and recorded everything.

She turned her expressionless face toward her master and tilted her head concerning his action.

"Itaru-sama, what is with that weak chop?"

"I used to know a guy who did stupid things like that, " he said quietly as he came to a stop in front of a gravestone. "Sf, give me the flowers."

"Tes."

She handed him the flowers and he began to place them in the vase in front of the gravestone.

But someone must have been there before them because the vase already contained new flowers. And the bright flowers were not chrysanthemums.

"Diana…"

"Diana-sama? Why?"

"You wouldn't understand, Sf. Not that I do either."

With a bitter smile, he loosened his black necktie that blew in the mountain wind.

"This world is full of things I don't understand. Not only that, but only me and a few other people even know of the world's true mystery."

"The world's true mystery?"

"That's right, Sf. Have you never thought about it? This Gear has nothing but negative concepts, so why has it never before fallen too far to the negative side and been destroyed?" His bitter smile deepened. "That Sayama must search out the answer to that question…no, he must search out an even greater answer than that. Those once known as the Eight Great Dragon Kings asked the question and the Five Great Peaks sealed the answer."

He placed his own flowers in the vase.

"Sf, the water. …No, wait!"

He turned around just in time to see Sf preparing to dump the contents of the bucket on the gravestone.

"But you did this last time we were here… Is there a problem? I even checked my memory three times over."

"Don't repeat what every Japanese person thinks at some point."

"Tes. I understand. You are saying I should not repeat a gag, correct? What gag should we go with this time?"

"German machines are a pain in the ass. …Do it like you're watering the gravestone."

"Tes."

Sf pulled a small watering can from beneath her apron.

"Just out of curiosity, why were you walking around with that?"

"Tes. So I could carry out any request you might have. I was correct to bring my S equipment that I take with me on walks. The S stands for 'stroll' and the equipment was decided on with a strict lottery. Would you like to attend the next selection meeting? The prize for attendance is a notebook and pencil."

"UCAT has become a very wasteful organization."

"Tes. That is a sign of stability. …Hm?"

"What is it, Sf?"

"I only just now notice the name on this gravestone."

The front of the watering can pointed toward the front of the gravestone. The sprinkled water revealed a name there.

"Sayama."

Shinjou sat in a sofa with a jacket on as she waited in front of UCAT's underground training rooms.

It was currently 4 PM and she was waiting for an opening in the training rooms. The adults around her were doing the same. The men's and women's locker rooms faced each other, so men and women of all ages gathered in the lobby.

"There isn't going to be an open training room at this rate. But I told Sayama-kun I was training today."

The wall in front of the locker rooms contained electronic boards displaying the status of each training room.

…2nd-Gear is using all of them for official secret training.

As they were preparing to oppose the Leviathan Road, they had top priority. Even Team Leviathan had to wait for a cancellation that might not come.

She wondered what 2nd-Gear was doing.

…They've definitely started moving.

That thought eliminated all calm from her body.

She wore white jeans and her legs were crossed. She rested both her elbows on her lap and held a small handheld game system.

A UCAT worker had given her the two-button device. The game took place in a southern ocean where the player repeatedly gathered treasure from the bottom of the ocean while avoiding the legs of a large oceanic creature that was trying to communicate.

But the old and blurry LCD screen would reach game over and stop running after only ten points.

She did not recognize any of the other people waiting.

She looked around and saw that it was truly a strange mixture of people.

Some of them were not even human and those stood out the most.

She then realized something. Ooki, for example, would not show her long ears except in a concept space.

Do they not mix well with this Gear? she wondered. *Do Sayama-kun and I mix well?*

That last thought caused her to shake her head.

…Why am I thinking such dark thoughts.

She put the game in her jacket's inner pocket and stood up.

It was unlikely any of the training rooms would open up, so staying would only bring more dark thoughts.

Just as she decided to go elsewhere, everyone around her suddenly stirred.

"…"

She turned in the same direction as everyone else and saw one of the labels on the electronic board had changed. The scarlet indicator had vanished and a voice came from the speaker on the ceiling.

"Um, thank you very much for, um, using Japanese UCAT's training room. Um, what comes next…? Oh, Training Room 7, Training Room 7. 2nd-Gear's training is complete. The door will open soon, so be careful. The same training room will now be used by German UCAT. Um, anyone trying to force their way in will be… I just

said not to go in, you goddamn ape!! Okay, the door will close now.”

Shinjou heard several disappointed groans and her own shoulders drooped.

She took two or three steps away from the others because she just wanted to get away.

But before she could, a new stir ran through the crowd .

A group had left the men’s locker room.

The men still wore UCAT’s white combat uniforms.

A dozen or so men walked out while still prepared for battle.

Their harsh atmosphere silenced the crowd.

Shinjou spotted Kashima and Atsuta within the group.

Kashima stood out at the front of the group because he alone wore a work uniform.

He was explaining some numbers to Atsuta while gesturing with his hands.

Behind those two were a few elderly men with tools hanging from their waists and people carrying computers and large instrumentation on stretchers.

The men waiting their turn commented as they passed by.

“They gathered all of 2nd-Gear’s engineers, didn’t they ?”

And then everyone gasped when the next stretcher was carried from the locker room.

It contained a large white table on which a pile of Cowling Sword fragments sat.

It all had to have made up at least thirty swords originally.

The weapons had been created to combat alternate worlds, but they had broken.

“You can destroy those?” someone muttered.

No one else dared speak.

"…"

Shinjou stared blankly at the swaying stretchers and the men.

That was when Kashima looked up.

Her gaze met his head on.

"Ah…"

She took a step back, but the sofa was directly behind her.

By the time she wondered what to do, he was already right in front of her.

As she stood defensively, he opened his mouth to speak.

"You are Shinjou Sadame of Team Leviathan, aren't you? Do you have a moment?"

Kashima looked at Shinjou in front of him.

She wore an orange jacket, a white shirt, and white jeans.

He felt it was not just his imagination that her slender frame looked unreliable. She had taken a defensive pose.

…But she's trembling.

Before entering the training room, Tsukuyomi had informed Ooshiro Itaru when the Leviathan Road would begin.

At the same time, Tsukuyomi had received documents on the members of Team Leviathan.

All of the documents had some portions blacked out because the information was classified.

But Shinjou Sadame's document had contained a certain note.

…Based on her mentality, it is possible she is not suited for an offensive role.

He had dug further and found that her Ex-St had never been used at its full output.

Most of the retrieved data stopped before reaching the highest output range. The one exception was a single time during the battle with 1st-Gear when the output had gotten very close.

He remembered it had been the same when he had met her in the cafeteria.

She had been standing right next to Sayama when Atsuta had provoked the boy, but she had not moved.

He did not know why.

The blacked out portions of her file may have explained it and they may not have.

The one thing he did know was that she was the one who stood by Sayama's side.

But, he thought. *That boy hopes to fight.*

Then what about this girl?

"Shinjou Sadame-kun, we have not met since the cafeteria, have we?"

"Wh-what do you want?" she asked cautiously.

He nodded once to put her at ease.

While thinking about her and Sayama, he spoke.

"Since then, I have chosen to fight. How about you?"

He saw her shrink back at his question.

She let out a short breath and looked up at him with no strength in her eyebrows.

"I don't know…"

"But you want to know, don't you? You asked me about my lie in the cafeteria."

She thought for a moment before answering.

"I want to know? …What answer do you want?"

She was likely asking herself the same question, so he nodded.

As she trembled before his eyes, he spoke as if to teach her and to warn her.

“For the sake of the future, I want the answer to all my questions.”

He thought back and the landslide from eight years ago entered his mind.

“Why could I not forget my power when I tried so hard to forget?”

He recalled Natsu’s hand that he had grabbed.

“Why do I hurt the person who I want to be with?”

He thought of his parents.

“Why do I feel alone when so many people care for me ?”

He recalled his grandfather on his deathbed.

“Why do I feel like I am out of sync with this world?”

And he brought back his memories of the past eight years.

"Why do I feel as if I cannot just choose one or the other?"

He asked each question in a calm tone, but Shinjou shrank back further and further.

He opened his mouth yet again as if to draw her back.

As he spoke his final question, he thought of Natsu, of Harumi, and of the future.

"Why do I want to gain everything with my own power even as these questions eat into me?"

Shinjou bit her lower lip and trembled.

She lowered her head as if thanking him. She then lowered her shoulders and let out a breath.

"Kashima-san, do you think you will receive your answer if you fight?"

"I will not receive my answer. I will go out and take it. …It scares me, though."

She raised her head and looked at him with slight tears in her eyes.

He placed a hand on her head and stroked it gently to put her at ease.

"You do not know whether it is the truth or the lie that makes you fear yourself. But I am sure the person who cares for you is waiting for you on the side of truth."

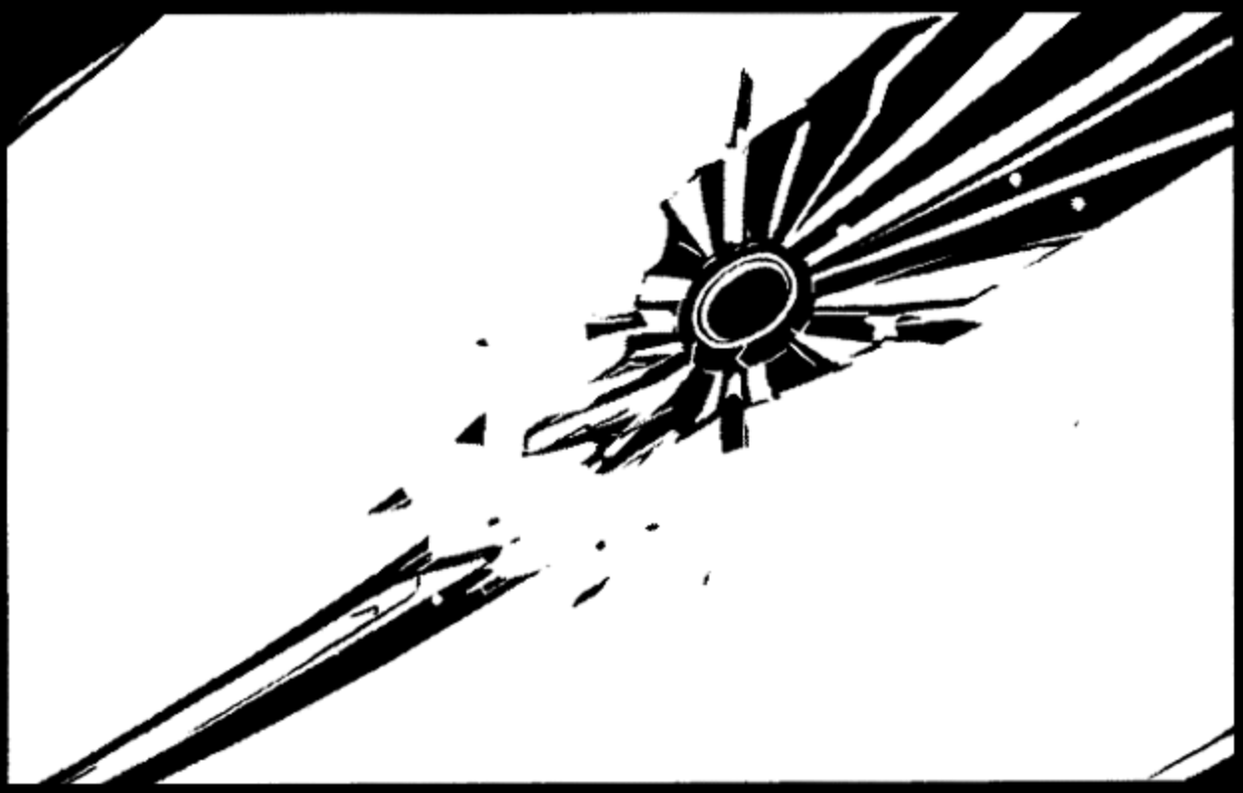
He took a breath.

"I spent eight years lying. When will you be able to choose yourself within the fear?"

Chapter 21: Honest Intentions

Chapter 21

“Honest Intentions”



When your question repeatedly rings out
It resembles striking stone again and again
In which case, what will the answer sound like?

When your question repeatedly rings out

It resembles striking stone again and again

In which case, what will the answer sound like?

In the Tamiya household, breakfast and dinner were split into two.

The family ran a security company, so they served food for the employees who lived in the house. They would eat once before being sent out and once upon returning.

It was currently 6:00 PM, the first dinner.

Japanese food made by Kouji and those not on duty was laid out on the dinner tables lined up in the main hall.

On the upper end of the table were those who had just returned from their security job and a few of those tables

had beer on them. The three central seats of honor were all empty while Kouji and Ryouko sat in the two seats to their left.

Kouji would eat at the later dinner, so he munched on some beans, sipped on some tea, and sighed.

Ryouko ate at this earlier dinner, so she cheerfully swayed back and forth while poking at the food on her plate.

Kouji could not help but comment as he watched his elder sister eat her food.

“Tonight sure is peaceful.”

He lowered his gaze toward those surrounding the tables.

There were currently 51 of them and they were primarily those with day duty and those off duty that day. Adding in those currently out on night duty, there were 77 people total.

He looked at them, looked at his sister, and slowly opened his mouth.

"Everyone, just put up with it all for two more days. Father and mother will be back then."

Just as everyone let out a sigh of relief, Ryouko's shoulders rose slightly.

"Sorry, but our parents called a bit ago. They said they 've taken a liking to the hot spring they stopped by on their way back, so they want us to send that body board. Y'know, the one they bought last year. Here, this has the address of the inn and when they will be back."

She pulled a note from her kimono sleeve and handed it to Kouji. Kouji's expression clouded over.

"They won't be back until next week?"

"Did I say anything wrong?" asked Ryouko.

"No, the blame does not lie with you. It's just like how the blame does not lie with nuclear power itself."

"Kouji, try not to mention nuclear power. Look, Shige-san is holding his head and trembling."

"Sorry, sorry. Hey, could someone bring him his Marxism book?"

Once that was complete and the dinner began again, Kouji sighed again.

"By the way, I hear Atsuta-san stopped by the other night when you were locking up."

"Yeah, he did. We chatted a bit. How did you know?"

"I met him yesterday and he mentioned it." Kouji frowned. "But I take it you told him about the young master."

"I did. Why do you bring it up? The young master is no longer so nervous, so it doesn't matter if I tell people, does it?"

Kouji's face paled.

"Sister, do you know why Atsuta-san passed by our house?"

"It was just a coincidence, right? That's what he said."

"How do you feel about him?"

"I guess he's a nice guy." She tilted her head while Kouji's pale face stiffened. "When we would play

pachinko back in our school days, he would lend me balls. He was also good at getting the slots just right. And when he would go on his own, he would bring back presents for me. It was usually cookies or some other snack."

"He was trying to lure you in with food. …Anyway, just like old times, do not tell anyone about the young master."

"Eh? That's no fun. I need to brag about him to the people in the neighborhood."

"But you help out the neighborhood and work for the neighborhood association."

"Stop arguing with me."

As Ryouko began pretending to cry, a sound came from her right elbow.

Kouji looked down and found she had toppled her teacup and tea was spreading across the table.

"Ah," she said.

"Sister…" said Kouji with a cold look in his eyes.

"Th-this time, it wasn't my fault. Wait, don't lock me out again. Ahh, Kouji! Why are you pulling on my ear!?"

Kouji ignored her, stood up with her ear still pinched between his fingers, and looked around at the others.

"Please excuse us. Feel free to continue eating."

"Ow ow ow ow! Stop, Kouji! Help me, everyone! I'm the company president."

"Yes, yes. We all know how important you are, sister. Now, let's go outside. …Please ignore this, everyone. This is a family issue."

"C'mon! If you treat a female president roughly, there will be a murder!"

"That murder will occur at nine on Tuesday night and will be solved by eleven. Everything will be fine."

"Wrong! It will be solved at 10:45! Ow ow ow ow ow!! S-stop! Who do you think pays your allowance?"

"Masa-san from accounting."

"Masaaa!! Why are you buying people off!?"

That shout was ignored as the sliding door opened and closed. The siblings and their voices soon vanished down the passageway.

A few people calmly wiped up the spilled tea and continued eating.

Shinjou was out in the city of Okutama.

Night had almost completely fallen. Her wristwatch said it was just past 6:30 PM.

The IAI bus was enough to reach the city, but she had opted to walk. She had taken a long route which took around two hours.

If she had taken the bus, she might have run across Sayama.

That was also why she had gone out to the city.

“I don’t know where to go,” she muttered.

She was currently on the grounds of the Hikawa Shrine near Okutama Station. If one left the station, left

the roundabout to the south, and crossed the intersection, the shrine was right there.

The bus passed through this area, but the shrine was located near a flowing mountain stream on a lower level.

The vehicles passing by on the road above could only see the shrine's roof.

Shinjou sat in front of the shrine on stone steps which were chilly from the night air.

As it was night, there were no playing children around and the air chilled her skin.

She figured it was about time Sayama would leave UCAT and return to the school dorm.

He ate dinner at eight, so he always returned by that time.

The only exceptions were when he met Shinjou Sadame at UCAT and ate dinner there.

Because she was currently here, he would definitely return to school by eight.

"…"

Travelling from Okutama to Akigawa took an hour and a half by bus and train.

To return by eight, he would have to head for Okutama Station from UCAT at just past six.

Earlier, she had seen the roof of the IAI bus pass by on the road above. It had been headed north, toward the station. That was the most likely bus for Sayama to have been on. Once another bus passed by, she would return to UCAT.

"It's been a while since I slept at UCAT."

A nap room at UCAT was Shinjou's "home".

But she did not have much there at the moment.

"Setsu took it all with him."

She held her own body while thinking. She thought about how she did not want to see Sayama and what Kashima had said.

"What will I choose…?"

She bent forward while thinking. She placed her chin on her raised knees and swept sand off the stone steps with both hands.

And then she realized something.

…I want to choose, but I'm afraid to.

Would she continue with her lie or would she stop?

"It scares me…"

She raised her head from her knees and sighed.

Suddenly, a bus passed by on the road above.

It was the IAI bus. Was Sayama on that bus?

"If so, it'll pull into the station."

It stopped.

"And he'll get out."

She recalled Sayama's brisk actions. He would make his way into the station only a few seconds after disembarking the bus. As she pictured the scene in her head, she smiled bitterly and muttered to herself.

"This is goodbye, isn't it?"

She stood up, brushed off her butt, looked around again, and realized the darkness had deepened.

The only light was coming from the incandescent lights on the shrine's grounds.

She began walking. As the slight night wind washed over her, she silently descended the stone stairs, left the shrine's grounds, and climbed the slope next to it.

As she headed for the shrine's entrance, she heard the whistle of the train leaving the station.

Past some external lights, she saw a line of lights moving quickly through the darkness of the mountain. As the train travelled along a raised structure, it headed east toward the city of Tokyo.

Sayama was likely on that train.

…He left without ever knowing I was here.

And that thought brought something else.

"Uuh…" she groaned.

For some reason she suddenly stopped walking and strength gathered below her mouth.

"What am I…?"

What am I doing? she belatedly thought.

She recalled what she had been doing all day.

…And yet he is always looking out for me.

"I'm running away because I'm too scared of the answer I might get…"

That thought seemed to hit her head hard. Her stomach felt heavy and her vision grew distorted.

She felt heat gather at the corners of her eyes, she let out another quiet groan, and she wiped her eyes with her sleeve.

Checking her sleeve told her that her eyes had been a bit damp.

Why had they been damp?

Ahh, I'm completely hopeless, she thought when she realized why.

She held something so heavy in her heart.

"And yet I'm avoiding Sayama-kun."

She was not trying to speak with him.

In front of the training rooms, Kashima had told her to choose, but Sayama had already left.

"It's all because I lied…and ran away."

As she spoke, an unexplainable feeling squeezed at her chest and began to grow stronger.

She could not stand it, so she moved beneath a large cedar tree at the shrine entrance.

"Why was I so afraid of Sayama-kun that I chose my lie?"

She began shedding tears as if providing a release for the painful feeling welling up within her.

A sob escaped her lips and she frantically wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket.

But as more and more tears appeared, she was unable to keep up.

She had no choice but to place the sleeve over her eyes and cover her face.

As if blocking her vision had been a sign, her shoulders began to tremble and her breathing grew erratic.

She cried.

She began coughing and could not form words, so she thought.

…Sayama-kun. I really do want to see you.

She thought it was silly to think that now, but a scratchy voice finally escaped as she thought about the fact that he had left.

"I want to see you."

…This is what I really think.

What would he say to her if she did see him? When he asked her something, how would she respond?

She did not know. She simply wanted to see him. It scared her, but she did.

"Hyah…"

The tears showed no sign of stopping, so she gave in to the crying.

While the desire to see him and the knowledge that she could not mixed together, she tried to lean against the trunk of the cedar tree.

She wanted something to support her.

And…

"Shinjou-kun."

The voice she heard caused her to tremble and stop breathing.

In Shinjou's teary vision, she saw a boy and an old man backlit by the outdoor lights.

While holding a sake bottle, the boy approached from the sidewalk in front of the shrine.

Shinjou defensively held up her hands at chest level, but…

"Sayama-kun?"

She did not step back. She only asked the question filling her mind.

"Why?"

"What a silly question, Shinjou-kun. You wanted to see me, did you not? Would you like to join us? I was on my way to eat dinner at run-down Hiba-sensei's wonderful dojo."

"Mikoto, I think you mixed up your descriptions of me and the dojo."

"Sensei, listen carefully. Appearance is not what matters with people. It is first impressions that matter."

"That's the same thing, you fool."

Sayama ignored Ryuutetsu's opinion and held his left hand out toward Shinjou.

Shinjou stared at his hand and took in a breath. Her trembling lips moved a few times and she breathed out.

"Why are you here…?"

"Because you wished for it and I wished for it," he said as the wind brushed through his hair. "If you are feeling pain and I wish to protect you, I will protect you. If you do not wish to be alone and I wish to speak with you, I will speak with you. If you have decided you wish to carry your worries alone and I care for you, I will leave you to be on your own. If you do not wish to be here and I wish to do what is best for you, I will hate you."

And…

"If you wish to grow closer to someone and I see you, I will stand by your side." He kept his hand held out toward her. "How does that sound?"

But she did not answer by taking his hand.

What she had thought she had lost now stood before her.

That fact eliminated her fear. She let out a voice that split through the night sky and she leaped toward his chest.

"Ahhh!"

Sayama firmly caught her.

All she could do was shed tears, cling to his chest, and speak.

"I don't want to…"

She breathed in and repeated her confused thoughts.

"I don't want to lie…"

Her hands scratched at his suit, shirt, and vest and she pressed against him.

"But…but… If you learn my lie…you'll hate me… That scares me…"

She sobbed as she breathed in and out.

"Both Setsu and I are important."

"I know."

"Setsu is the same."

"I know."

"B-but Setsu keeps causing trouble for you. He can't be with you, but he wants to be."

She did not know what to do.

"I don't know what to do… I don't know and it scares me!!"

"I see," he said and reached his hands around to her back.

He embraced her awkwardly at first, but then adjusted his grip as if making sure.

As strength entered his arms, she heard a bottle breaking at their feet.

The old man to the side let out a dismayed cry, but they both ignored him.

“I want to be with you…”

Shinjou’s heavy breathing struck his chest and tears spilled from her eyes.

“I want to be with you…”

She could tell Sayama had nodded.

But he said nothing in response. He only patted her back lightly with his left hand. He repeated the action again and again as if telling her to calm down.

And for some reason, she felt the excess strength leave her own body. She slightly loosened her grip on him and her tears slowed. There may have been something nostalgic about the patting on her back.

It felt like nostalgia for part of her own past that she did not remember.

She heard his pulse through the ear pressed against his chest.

The sound was slightly hastened but still calm.

She matched her breathing to his and relaxed further.

She was exhausted.

The weariness rose from the bottom of her body. The sudden tired feeling seemed to fill the core of her mind.

“I’m sorry. I only ever cause trouble for you…”

He only replied once she said that.

He gave a confident nod and spoke.

"That is not true."

Just as he had in the past, he denied her words. She did not know how to respond.

Should she smile or shake her head?

Before she came to an answer, she lost consciousness in his arms and toppled over.

A large, white space was filled with several large machines.

This was the 3rd Production Room. A single red-hot sword sat in front of the large, flat work table in the center of the room.

It was a thick blade with a length of over two and a half meters.

It was named Futsuno.

Futsuno was split in two. The hilt and blade were broken and separated.

That damage had been caused by an accident during an experiment.

A single man wearing a work uniform stood in front of Futsuno's broken form.

He was Kashima.

But he was facing forward rather than at Futsuno. He was facing the 3rd Production Room's entrance.

He was watching five younger people in identical work uniforms.

"Now then," he said to them. "We have completed the first stage of the repairs. It does not need to be hammered out any more with a chisel, so we will now re-carve the name that the sword lost when it was broken."

A chubby young man with short hair asked a question.

"Manager, we have the frame for the Cowling Sword, but when will we make the cowling to regulate and direct the power?"

"An excellent question, Katori. But we do not need one for Futsuno."

Everyone else gasped.

“B-but a concept weapon like that would be too dangerous.”

“The danger is determined by who uses it. When someone’s life is taken, do you blame the weapon?”

One of the others began walking toward Kashima.

The young man was named Mikami and he had a sharp look in his eyes.

“I am opposed to everything that is going on in here.”

“Are you? Why?”

Kashima casually nodded toward Mikami and the young man’s eyebrows formed a harsh look.

“You are being conceited. You assume we are on the side of justice and that it is acceptable for us to wield destructive weapons.”

“Wow. That’s quite something,” said Kashima in a sarcastic tone.

Mikami glared at him for an instant.

But he quickly turned toward Futsuno and spoke.

“Powerful weapons can become tools of killing depending on who uses them.”

“Hmm. I suppose that’s true.” Kashima relaxed his shoulders. “But what if the weapon you create can’t stop our enemies?”

“Well…”

“What will you do then? Will you blame the weapon? Of course not. The blame lies with us, the ones who created the losing weapon.”

The others frowned when Kashima said “us”.

As they all watched him, he looked down at the ring finger and little finger of his own left hand.

“It’s quite something, but there is justice there.”

“Where!?”

"In the trust. But not the trust in the weapon's power. The trust between the one who made it and the one who wields it. For example, Atsuta has promised me he will not kill."

"…"

"Swords are swords and people are people. Weapons exist to fulfill their role as weapons. Am I wrong?" He took a breath. "Do not fear your power, do not fear your weapon, and do not feel overly proud of either one. We create weapons. Our thoughts are transferred to the blades and reach the ones who wield them. So gather your beliefs as you forge the sword and only hand it to someone you can trust. If you do that, they will exhibit only the power we want."

Kashima took a step back and approached Futsuno and the shimmering of heat rising from it.

He then looked toward Mikami and the others.

As he nodded, he looked at the collection of machines behind the others.

They were machine tools and heat-resistant equipment that they had brought in from the 2nd Production Room.

Noticing where Kashima was looking, Katori tilted his head.

“Is there a problem?”

His voice trembled slightly. It was a weak tremble and the ends of his eyebrows were lowered.

But Kashima ignored that trembling and emotion. He replied casually.

“What is all that equipment for? Don’t tell me you plan to use it on Futsuno.”

“But to work on the high-temperature frame, we need-…”

Katori’s words were cut off by a small laugh.

It was not Kashima’s laugh. The bitter laugh came from behind.

Kashima's shoulders drooped in exasperation and he turned around.

An elderly manager stood before a white plant base which was tempering metal.

The one-eyed man turned his darkened face toward Kashima.

"That's right, Kashima. You've gotta teach them from the ground up. These kids started down the path of swordsmithing from an intellectual standpoint."

"What a pain. …Okay, do you all understand your own name?"

While looking at the younger men, Kashima placed his left hand on Futsuno's blade.

That mass of metal was red-hot and the air above it shimmered.

The five men before his eyes all gasped at his action. But…

"Nothing happened?" asked Mikami with a pale face.

Kashima nodded.

As Mikami had said, Kashima's left hand was unaffected by the high temperature blade.

"We are sword gods, military gods, and swordsmith gods. You cannot be harmed by that which you are meant to use. With a block of metal that has yet to be made into a blade, you need nothing but a metal comb and chisel. In fact, even that is too much. The more you work through unnecessary tools, the more your conversation with the metal will stray off track."

Kashima grabbed Futsuno's broken hilt.

He picked it up, spun it around, and held the hilt out toward the five of them.

"If you believe in your name enough to touch this, you may help work on Futsuno. Got it?"

Chapter 22: Impetus to Stand Up

Chapter 22

“Impetus to Stand Up”

You make a decision
You may have done so in conceit
But that is where it begins

You make a decision

You may have done so in conceit

But that is where it begins

Sayama looked up at the night sky.

He was sprawled out while lying on the ground.

I got my clothes dirty, he thought while standing up in his vest.

Turning his head caused a dull pain. And in a lot more than one place.

…That shows just how many times I have been slammed into the ground.

Beyond the cold air of the night, he could see the dark blue night sky and the dark shapes of the mountains.

He was in the outdoor dojo located next to Hiba Ryuutetsu's dojo/home in the mountains of Okutama.

The dojo was in an elevated area, so the starlight was enough to see the ground.

Sayama stood up and looked over his shoulder while surrounded by the evening dew in the air.

He was inside by a 15 meter square dojo made of wood. The center had been trodden down until no grass remained and an old man stood there now.

He was Hiba Ryuutetsu.

His red eye and white shirt showed up best in the night.

His short silhouette showed he had his arms folded.

“What’s wrong? I hope you aren’t going to say you’re too heavy because you ate too much.”

“No, that is not it. Oddly enough, I do not remember eating much of that hot pot we had for dinner.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“For some reason, a petty monkey came down from the mountains and ate my portion of the food. When I

struck him on the temple and called him an undisciplined beast, he dragged me out here."

Sayama brought a hand to his chin and looked up at Ryuutetsu's face from a diagonal angle.

"Also, that monkey looked an awful lot like you."

"Do you have any idea how to respect your elders?"

"Unfortunately, all the elders around me are the worst possible examples. I truly hate the elderly." He looked back at Ryuutetsu and gasped. "There is an elderly person right there. Could this day get any worse?"

"Okay, Mikoto. I'll kick your ass for that later, but listen up for the moment."

"Fine then. Please speak, Hiba-sensei."

"I've given up fighting your mistaken politeness. … Anyway, that idiot Kaoru would occasionally visit here and complain about you. At the beginning of spring in your second year of middle school, he said you got into a fight and wouldn't speak to him."

"I was trying to study for the end-of-term exams, but he charged at me shouting 'revenge for the great pudding!'. I merely slammed him into the counter in response. He said the pudding he had bought had vanished and we began a five hour fistfight. In the end, we discovered the guard dog Pes had eaten it. A dog that can open the refrigerator is bad enough, but I think an old man that hasty deserves to be castrated immediately. It is too late for that now, though."

"I see that idiot never changed."

Ryuutetsu's comment brought a slight pain to the left side of Sayama's chest.

…Come to think of it, I only know that the two of them were old acquaintances.

Had Ryuutetsu been a part of the National Defense Department?

It is too soon to say, he thought with a bitter smile. *But he should have heard my grandfather's conditions for the Leviathan Road.*

Those related to the Leviathan Road could not provide information on Gears unrelated to themselves.

And so Sayama faced Ryuutetsu while still feeling the slight pain in his chest.

“Once more.”

“Are you sure this is accomplishing anything?”

“Of course. You were able to reproduce the Art of Walking just from my explanation. Merely knowing anyone can pull it off is a huge step forward.”

This was a simple dojo without a concept space, but Ryuutetsu had merely said “this is probably what they are doing” and suddenly reproduced the technique.

On the level of perception, Sayama could see him more than with Diana or Atsuta.

But it was still too much for him to react.

Ryuutetsu refused to tell him how it was done. He told Sayama to figure it out on his own. That was how it always was.

"I would like to do this once more, even if you do not wish to."

"You leave me no choice. But I'd rather not stay up this late at my age, you know?"

"I hear your wife caught you watching adult programs late at night and threw you in the well."

"Don't be silly. She didn't throw me in. I jumped in to escape her. It was the middle of the winter, but she still put on the lid and placed a weight on top."

He approached while calmly speaking.

"It may be a bit late to say this, but I am glad to see you are doing well, Hiba-sensei."

Sayama moved as well. He took the initiative and attacked.

He aimed for the knees with a left kick.

"Would you look at that? You can give a proper greeting. …But that's too slow."

The back of that leg was kicked out of the way.

As he lost balance, Ryuutetsu charged in.

Once the old man got close, he would grab Sayama's collar and throw him.

So Sayama sank down and placed his hands on the ground in a sitting position.

And he kicked forward with the leg that had been knocked out of the way.

But…

"You fool. I thought I taught you not to throw a straight kick if it isn't gonna hit."

With that comment, he grabbed Sayama's leg.

He grabbed at the ankle and the back of the thigh.

"!"

As if righting a log, he lifted Sayama's body using the leg.

He stood Sayama up.

The next thing he knew, he was standing up and Ryuutetsu stood right in front of him.

“How do you like that?”

“A clever trick. It makes me think you are trying to trick me into thinking you have any kind of skill.”

“You never shut up, do you? You could at least show me some respect.”

With a bitter smile, Ryuutetsu vanished. More accurately, Sayama’s eyes ceased to see him.

But he could still perceive him.

“Listen. There is one way to defeat this Art of Walking. You need to catch on to the trick.”

Sayama then felt someone grabbing the collar of his vest.

“Is this still not enough? Are you sure you were looking at that girl properly?”

Shinjou opened her eyes in the darkness.

She first noticed that she was lying in a futon and that she was wearing different clothes.

She quickly sat up and the futon fell off of her.

The area around her was still dark, but she could see faint pale light coming through a sliding door to the right .

She was in an oblong room that had an area over 18 square meters. She had been sleeping near the entrance and the only furnishing was a partition screen covered in cursive writing located toward her feet.

There was no one else in the room.

Once she took a breath and looked down at herself, she found she was wearing a white yukata.

The left chest of the yukata said “Hiba Dojo”.

…Then is this inside the dojo?

She had never been there before, so she could not say for sure.

"But I'm hungry."

Her stomach felt completely empty. That was why she had woken up. *Pathetic*, she thought while holding her stomach.

Suddenly, a light appeared to her left. The light was accompanied by the sound of a sliding screen and a female voice.

"Are you hungry?"

She squinted as she looked toward the sudden brightness and she saw an old woman entering the room.

She was wearing Japanese-style clothes and she held a tray with a small pot on it.

Shinjou wondered who this was, but the old woman with short gray hair showed no sign of caution.

"I will iron your clothes, so you can wait until tomorrow morning. I was the one that changed you out of them. Kids these days certainly have nice bodies."

"That…isn't true."

Shinjou saw the woman sit next to her and fix the futon that had fallen to her lap.

After the thick futon was flattened out, the woman placed the small pot and tray on top of it.

Shinjou used a pillow behind her waist to hold her in place and she looked back and forth between the tray and the old woman.

"U-um…"

…Where is Sayama-kun?

"If you are wondering about the young Sayama, he is practicing something with my husband in the side yard. It has been two years since he did that. He said there is someone he must defeat."

…Oh, I get it.

Sayama had mentioned he would ask Ryuutetsu about 2nd-Gear's Art of Walking. He must have been on his way there after leaving UCAT when he had come across her.

…I can't believe he would go ask someone for help.

That likely showed how much he trusted this place.

But then she remembered why she was here.

…I said some odd things, cried, and clung to him at the Hikawa Shrine.

As Shinjou thought, the old woman opened the lid to the small pot on the tray. A lot of steam brought the aroma of bonito to her nose.

"Wah," she said as she looked down at the pot.

"The others had a hot pot, so I made ojiya out of it."

"Ojiya?"

She saw damp, colored rice with vegetables casually thrown in.

The yellow covering the surface of the rice was likely egg.

"It may not look pretty, but it is a type rice soup without much liquid. You can eat it and go back to sleep.

I heard about you from the young Sayama. It seems he wants to speak with you about something, but you aren't ready yet, are you?"

Shinjou thought for a moment and then nodded.

"I still haven't gathered my thoughts."

Despite saying that, she had made a decision in her heart.

That decision was why she had clung to Sayama's chest.

"I didn't want to keep lying." She took a breath. "So once I calm down, I think I will reveal my lie to Sayama-kun."

"I see."

With that word, a hand was placed on her head.

It brushed her head.

The reassuring warmth she felt through her hair seemed to push tears out of her eyes.

"…Hyah."

"Oh, dear."

The old woman let go of her head and rubbed her back .

The hand on her back helped calm down her sobbing breaths.

"I wonder if he'll hate me…"

"I do not know that, but I do know that you are a diligent hard-worker and that the heavens will help out people like that."

Shinjou smiled bitterly at that.

"If the tears have stopped, you can eat. And we can keep it a secret that you woke up. You can go back to sleep once you finish eating."

"B-but I need to get home…"

"Young Sayama contacted someone earlier and said you would be spending the night here."

He had likely been speaking with Ooshiro. This relieved Shinjou a bit and she smiled bitterly again.

After taking a breath, she realized there was nothing she had to do.

And so she should eat. The problem would wait until tomorrow.

She picked up the spoon and scooped up some slightly dry egg.

She timidly brought it to her mouth.

"…Nn."

The surface had cooled, but the inside was warm.

The flavor of the thick and moist rice had a hint of soup stock made from soft bonito. She felt soft noodles between the rice.

She brought the first bite into her mouth as if searching for its identity and something like a plant stalk came apart on her tongue. Sweetness spread out within her mouth.

"The egg is cooked just right, isn't it?"

Shinjou nodded and smiled a bit.

She then brought another spoonful to her mouth.

She decided to leave the egg for last and smiled bitterly again.

"Have you cheered up a little?" asked the old woman as she rubbed Shinjou's head again. "You're a good kid. I 'll tell the others you are still asleep, so sleep until morning. You will work diligently tomorrow, right? So take this time to get some rest."

Sayama found Ryuutetsu's comment odd.

"Are you saying Shinjou-kun is connected to the Art of Walking?"

As he spoke, his body was carried forward and he heard Ryuutetsu speaking.

"Have you been looking at her properly?"

"I…"

"Shut up. I'm asking the question. And you're not the one to answer it. The answer will come with the result you and she reach."

Sayama's body was lifted up onto Ryuutetsu's waist.

"You are right. You are wrong in the right away. But did you properly face that girl as a villain when you made her cry? You know she was truly crying, don't you ?"

Ryuutetsu pulled him further forward and moved in to sweep his feet out from under him.

"Did you look at her properly just now? Did you see her true side?"

His body was thrown up into the air.

"If you were being a villain properly and you were looking at the true side of that girl, you would know what it means to see things and to not see things."

The sensation of Ryuutetsu's grasp suddenly vanished .

"I did it. I pulled it off perfectly. That was an unrestrained unseen throw. Now, break through it. If you don't, you'll fall on your head and die."

Sayama felt as if he had been thrown with all the old man's strength.

"…!"

He could not perceive the one who had thrown him and he had even lost track of the timing with which he had been thrown. No matter how skilled his ability to land was, there was nothing he could do without that starting point.

He did not understand anything at the moment.

He did not know in what way he was spinning or how he would land.

Hiba Ryuutetsu was a man who would truly try to finish him off.

Without a doubt, this throw could kill him.

So he had to see that unseen sensation.

"…"

Suddenly, he recalled a similar situation. He recalled when Diana had knocked him flying.

What had he said then?

"Why can I not see you even though I am seeing you?"

He had to confront them and think about what it meant to face them.

When he had faced Shinjou earlier, he had replied by embracing her.

When he did, he had received her pulse, breathing, body temperature, trembling, voice, touch, and tears.

And he had gathered his confidence and replied to her words.

…That is not true.

He could not make that rejection if he was not facing her.

And so he thought.

…We faced each other while both right and wrong.

She may have been hesitating and crying in fear over a lie, but even that was right.

So when was it that he would lose sight of Shinjou?

…She is my opposite, so it is when I am not facing her head on.

"It is when I have deviated from you!"

As soon as he grew convinced of that fact, Sayama understood the Art of Walking.

When he brought together the ideas of facing someone and being deviated from them, he arrived at the answer.

"Is that it?" he muttered while using all of his senses.

And he saw it.

He saw the state of his body. He saw the state of his surroundings.

But as soon as he perceived everything, his body slammed into the ground.

An elevated location was exposed to the wind of the night.

It was a rooftop.

Specifically, it was the top the first dorm in the row of girls' dorms in Taka-Akita Academy.

Two figures stood there. One was a girl holding a mop in both hands. The other was a young man holding a deck brush in one hand.

They were Kazami and Izumo wearing track suits.

They two of them were currently motionless.

Izumo had lowered his large body as he tried to approach Kazami.

Kazami had stopped his movement by holding the mop handle out horizontally between her hands.

The sudden stop of such quick actions had created a tension which hardened their bodies and repelled the surrounding wind.

But Kazami finally sighed and lowered her shoulders.

"I…saw it. I was able to defend."

"I see. So you saw it," said Izumo as he stood up.

He had a few fresh scrapes on his cheeks, but he smiled toward Kazami in the starlight.

"Well, that's the trick to 2nd-Gear's Art of Walking."

"But, Kaku. I can't believe you managed to pull off their technique. You couldn't do it at all last night and passed out from my counter. Did you have some kind of strange revelation while asleep today?"

"No, it was last night when you were healing my wounds with that sexual-…gah! A-at least let me finish my joke!"

Kazami ignored him, drew back the end of the mop, and smiled.

"Let's stop making this difficult and keep it simple. … So what is the trick to 2nd-Gear's Art of Walking?"

"Hm, well…" Izumo folded his arms and glanced over at her. "To be honest, I really want to make a joke here."

"I see. Then let me give you a useful bit of information. This roof is 16 meters up."

They both looked over at the fence on the edge. Kazami frowned when she heard Kaku make an indecisive groan.

"Do you want to make a joke that badly? Okay, you can make a small one."

"Eh? Really? Really? Okay, I need to decide what joke to go with. …Oh, I know! That one's sure to-…gwoh!"

"Okay, that's enough. You went over the time limit. Now give me the answer."

Izumo held his solar plexus and glared at her with half-lidded eyes.

"You want the answer? Well, it's pretty simple." He stood in front of her and held his right index finger in front of her eyes. "This is the center of your vision. Got it ? …Now watch this."

Without moving his finger, he slightly shifted the rest of his body to the right.

He then lowered his raised finger.

Kazami's eyes were not looking at the center of his body. She was looking at his side.

She more or less realized what this meant, so she spoke aloud to herself.

"You move from their vision such that they don't notice?"

"Not just that. Basically, you deviate from all of their senses and their timing just enough that they won't notice." He counted off the examples. "Breathing, movements, pulse, hearing, etc. You alter each individual one just slightly. When it's all combined together…"

"They can't perceive you?"

"Right. The more we focus, the more we refine our senses and the easier it is for them to deviate from them. It has nothing to do with speed or strength. If you can't perceive them, you can't evade their attacks even if they just walk up to you."

By the time he finished speaking, Izumo was suddenly standing next to her.

That was the Art of Walking.

“I can do this to you because of how well I know your timing. It would require a lot of training to pull it off against a stranger like Diana and it’s crazy to think anyone can keep multiple people from perceiving them like 2nd-Gear’s Atsuta did.”

“I see.” Kazami nodded and the wind blew through her hair. “So at your level, you can’t peep on the girls’ bath or enter the girls’ locker room.”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what are you talking about?”

“You don’t need to get so flustered. Something horrible will happen to you later, so calm down. Anyway , how do you plan to defeat this Art of Walking?”

“You just did it, remember? It’s simple once you realize how.”

“But how well will it work in a real battle?”

"Who knows. But for the moment, this is all we have. We found this one method, so we have to cling to it," said Izumo. "But the Art of Walking is a sad technique if you think about it."

He took a breath.

"You can view it as a technique where you flee from your opponent and refuse to face them."

Chapter 23: Chooser of Power

Chapter 23

“Chooser of Power”

A question arrives
It comes from the past
It comes from something precious

A question arrives

It comes from the past

It comes from something precious

The sky was dark and the morning sun had yet to rise.

However, a few lights were visible in the mountains of Okutama.

Most of them were from the early risers in farming homes, but one was different.

The light came from the Hiba household which had an outdoor dojo in an elevated area.

The light coming from the kitchen and entrance cast two people's shadows in front of the entrance.

Shinjou and the old woman from the previous night stood in the chilly morning air.

Shinjou's shadow was moving as she bowed to the old woman again and again.

"Thank you so much for everything."

With a troubled expression, she held a paper bag containing the breakfast the old woman had given her. It contained rice balls and vegetables.

The old woman wore a cooking apron and was smiling . She wiped her hands on the bottom of the apron.

"Hurry on home. You do not want to wake young Sayama, do you?"

"No," said Shinjou as she remembered when she had woken up that morning.

When she had first opened her eyes in the dark, Sayama had been sleeping in the futon next to hers.

His neck and right shoulder had been wrapped in bandages, he had been sleeping deeply, and he had shown no sign of waking as she changed clothes.

When she exited into the hallway, the old woman had stepped out of the kitchen.

"Um, Sayama-kun had bandages wrapped around him . Is he okay? Did he hit his head and…um…"

…I really hope he hasn't become even crazier.

She was seriously worried, so the old woman had thought a bit before answering.

"I heard he managed to prepare for the landing, even if just barely, so I doubt he will become any crazier than he already is."

"I see we view him the same as far as that is concerned ."

She sighed and the old woman smiled bitterly.

"Well, after our chat last night, I spoke with him a little longer. Shinjou…Sadame-san is it? It seems there is a lot going on between the two of you. Oh, and your brother Setsu-kun."

The old woman's words reminded Shinjou of the past. She did not recall anything in particular, though.

"Yes, there really is a lot going on."

"I hear he stuck his hand between your legs while you were in your underwear."

"Wh-why is he so open about that!?"

"Ha ha ha. Don't worry about it. It is not often that he speaks about people his own age. …You seem to be going through some difficulties, though."

"I might not call them difficulties, but I definitely find new surprises every day."

"In our opinion, it's a good thing. And we won't ask anything more."

"Why not? Don't you want to know more about me?"

"Do you want me to ask?"

Shinjou shook her head. She had made up her mind the night before.

"I will tell him myself.

The old woman nodded.

And her smile suddenly vanished.

As Shinjou was wondering what had happened, the old woman looked toward her right hand.

She asked a question with a curious tone of voice.

"By the way, who gave you that ring?"

"Eh? This?"

Shinjou looked down at the ring on the middle finger of her right hand.

She had a feeling it was okay to tell this old woman its origin.

"I've had it as long as I can remember. …I had this ring, a song, and my name."

"How much of this does young Sayama know?"

"He knows about the ring and the song, but he doesn't know about our name. He doesn't know the truth of the names Shinjou Setsu and Shinjou Sadame."

"The truth?" asked the old woman.

Shinjou nodded, thought for a moment, and chose her words carefully.

"The thing is, my real name is not Sadame or Setsu."

She had yet to tell Sayama this.

…He will never see this unless I reveal my lie.

"My current name is something like an alias. Everyone would treat my true self as something special, so I was given my current name. That's why I've never really used my true name."

"Are you okay with that?"

"My current name is more convenient for being who I am now. That is why I…no, we have been lying to Sayama-kun this whole time. I have never shown him my true self. Not even once. So…"

Shinjou trailed off and the old woman shook her head.

"Isn't young Sayama the one you should tell the rest to ? This isn't something to tell an old woman like me."

Her scolding tone made Shinjou nod. And…

"Do you know something about this ring?"

"I'm not sure." The old woman tilted her head with a troubled expression and chose her words carefully. "I don't want to get your hopes up, so I'll say this up front: that ring is a common product someone could have bought anywhere. I just thought I could make conversation if I knew who had given it to you."

"B-but do you know someone who wore the same ring ?"

Her question was wrapped in urgency and hope, but the old woman shook her head.

"I cannot talk about that so easily," she said. "It does not matter when, but if you ever feel like it and have the spare time, pursue that person and give it some thought. I hope that the answer you find is the same as the answer I have."

"…"

Shinjou remained silent, but she inwardly hoped for the same thing.

Just as a smile slipped out on Shinjou's face, the old woman nodded.

"But I know one thing for sure. You wish for the same type of place that young Sayama does, don't you? You wish for a place to fight and pursue yourself."

"I…"

She thought.

No, she had the answer without needing to think. She had found the answer back during the battle with 1st-Gear.

"Yes, I've made up my mind. I will stay by Sayama-kun's side. It scares me, but I will have him choose. I will reveal my lie…and see which version of me he prefers."

"Which version of you? Do you know which one he wants?"

"Yes. I know which version of me he will choose. …He will choose Sadame. He will choose the girl named Shinjou Sadame as the one who will guide him to his destiny.[2]" Shinjou took a breath and continued quietly. "I will make up for the lie I have told by going along with Sayama-kun's wishes. Lately, I have been constantly bewildered by him…and that helped me understand."

"Understand what?"

"If acting according to my own convenience is painful, I should try acting against my own convenience. That is what I have decided to do." Shinjou nodded. "I am convinced the answer I reach like that will not be painful. "

…I am not making the wrong decision.

Suddenly, she heard a motorcycle in the distance.

The old woman looked up.

"That is our grandson. He promised to come take some of our pickled vegetables. Apparently his girlfriend won't eat breakfast without them."

"Your grandson?"

As the old woman nodded, Shinjou realized it was her time to leave.

And so she bowed. The Hiba Dojo would cease to be a place for her and Sayama and become a place for this grandson and his grandparents. Just as she decided to leave, Shinjou belatedly realized something.

"U-um."

There was something she had to ask. She could not believe she had not already done so.

"I never asked for your name. …Do you mind telling me?"

"Toshi."

Toshi-san, she thought for an instant.

She felt as if a slight burden had been removed from her chest. She embraced the paper bag, took a breath, and spoke.

"Thank you very much, Toshi-san. The next time we meet…" She took a breath. "I will have stopped lying and I will visit along with Sayama-kun."

There was a place the morning light did not reach.

Several people slept underground in UCAT's third production room which had its lights off.

Five youths in work uniforms slept around a two and a half meter sword. They were all sitting or lying on the floor as they pleased.

A short distance from those five was the one person who was awake.

Kashima sat next to a grinder positioned a bit away from the center of the room.

He wore a lab coat over his work uniform and his stubble-covered face was turned toward the blade.

The blade was floating in a fixed place in midair and it no longer had any damage or heat.

The black metal had been sharpened and it produced a smooth shine.

As he watched it, Kashima placed a hand in his pocket. A few seconds later, he seemed to realize something.

"Oh, right. I…

"…quit smoking quite a while ago. Congrats, papa."

He heard a male voice from behind. Without turning toward it, he removed his hand from his pocket.

Someone held a stick of UCAT's nicotine gum in front of his face.

"Atsuta," he said while looking up at who held the gum.

"Have your memories of smoking reverted to eight years ago, too?"

The young man in a white cloak let out a breath when Kashima took the gum.

He stepped forward.

That sword god would always say something unnecessary when he acted, but he said nothing now.

He merely touched the blade.

Kashima remembered the past as he watched the man' s back, the hand touching the metal, and the legs supporting hm.

…This happened long ago, too.

He would create a blade and this sword god would evaluate it. That had seemed to happen almost every day eight years before.

At first, Atsuta had not wanted anything to do with him, but Atsuta had gradually accepted he had skill. At some point, it had evolved into their current relationship.

It lasted approximately ten seconds.

After that short yet long silence, the back before Kashima's eyes spoke.

"What the hell is this?"

His hand stroked the blade.

"You're hopeless."

"I'm hopeless?"

"Yeah," said Atsuta. "You go to all this effort, but it'll be obsolete once new technology comes along."

Atsuta's words led Kashima to realize something.

Atsuta was not looking at the blade. He was turned toward the five youths sleeping around it.

"Now we've become trailblazers to a certain extent. We have created 2nd-Gear's strongest Cowling Sword."

"Hey."

Atsuta looked over his shoulder to turn toward Kashima. He was smiling with his eyebrows bent. It was hard to tell if it was a troubled smile or a joyous one.

And he asked a question with that smile.

"Can I use this sword?"

Kashima nodded.

"Atsuta, tell me the truth."

"About what?"

"Did I…do a good job?"

"Of course." All doubt left Atsuta's expression. "But praising you would just make you conceited, so I won't say anything more. Even these kids here turned out to be some use. But..." He took a breath, started to speak, and stopped to choose his words. "It's a shame you can't brag about it to your wife."

"It is," agreed Kashima with a nod.

He removed the gum from its wrapper and placed the thin stick in his mouth.

He chewed it a few times and spoke with a smile.

"This thing tastes horrible."

The morning sun had begun to rise toward noon.

In the mountains of Okutama, a single voice came from the Kashima's parents' house.

The voice belonged to Natsu. She was reading a picture book.

She sat on the wooden floor of the southern veranda which faced a paddy field. She wore track pants and a white T-shirt and she held Harumi.

A blue knapsack she had brought from home sat next to her and it was open.

Natsu held a picture book titled "Yamata no Orochi".

As she read the book, a smile covered her face.

"Kusanagi was brought to heaven and it became known as Murakumo."

Those ending words were ones of happiness and Natsu closed the book with a smile after reading them aloud.

"Are you tired?" she asked.

However, her daughter had already closed her eyes.

She heard someone walking up on the tatami mats behind her.

She turned around to find Kashima's mother. The old woman wore Japanese-style clothes and peered at her from behind.

"Should I bring out a futon?"

"Please do."

The old woman nodded and headed for the closet inside the house.

Natsu stood up while holding her child.

"Um, where is father today? He did not even come out to mow this morning."

"Oh, that old man was sulking last night because you didn't drink with him even though he made the sake. He was getting annoying and a lot happened, but I ended up throwing him in the storehouse."

"I heard some noises coming from the storehouse this morning, but I thought it was just a cat."

"He's quieted down now, right?"

"Yes. In fact, I do not hear any signs of life."

"If I let him out now, he wouldn't learn his lesson, so we need to wait until noon." The old woman laid out the futon. "This is just the cute jealousy of an old woman. Keh keh keh."

As she laughed, she placed the futon in the shade but near the sun and placed a sheet over it.

"For one thing, you decided to only drink with Aki, right? You can't make an exception for his parents there. …Now, come on over."

Natsu placed Harumi in the futon. She then pulled a towel from her bag, lightly wrapped it around the baby, and made sure the child's neck was sitting properly.

"You've gotten good at that."

"I had a good teacher."

Natsu and the old woman exchanged a slight smile.

After a moment, the old woman looked outside. She looked far off in the east. The white buildings of IAI were visible on top of a mountain.

If one stood in the yard on a clear day like this, one would have an unobstructed view all the way to the city.

“How can that idiot Aki neglect such a wonderful wife on such a nice day?”

The old woman then looked at the two picture books on the veranda.

“Natsu-san, are those what I think they are?”

“Yes. My father drew those. Akio-san does not know I have them.”

“…”

“My mother told me long ago that he drew that series once he knew I was going to be born.”

Natsu took a breath, looked toward Harumi, and narrowed her eyes.

"I thought I could understand my father a little bit if I read them again now. Both as Kashima Natsu and as Takagi Natsu."

"Did you?"

"No. …But once I return home with Akio-san, I think I will call my parents."

"The situation with you and your parents sounds complicated."

"It is." Natsu gave a small smile. "May I ask what your maiden name was?"

"Kasuga. One could say you have the protection of both the Kashima Shrine and the Kasuga Shrine."

"Also, Akio-san has a friend who can be the Atsuta Shrine and the company he works for has the name Izumo. …It may be nothing but coincidences, but with this many, it has to be a good omen." Natsu turned toward the picture books. "I think you would understand. …We are both the princess and Kusanagi, aren't we? By marrying the bearer of power, we gain a surname and also change. And we also provide strength to the bearer."

"I'm not sure that works with my idiot trapped in the storehouse, but you are indeed providing strength to Aki ."

"Thank you very much. …We recently ended our couple's meeting by deciding Akio-san is Yamato Takeru . In that case, who is the hero to him? Who does he see as Susanoo? And does that person have their own princess and their own Kusanagi?"

"Which one are you right now?" asked the old woman. "Are you Kusanagi which was held by human hands or are you Murakumo which was presented to heaven?"

"I am Kusanagi. I am not Murakumo which knows nothing of the world and only acts a decoration. I am Kusanagi which cuts through the grass in the land of man."

She nodded.

"That is how I should use the power my bearer has given me."

A train station on the western side of Tokyo connected a few different lines.

It was named JR Haijima Station.

The station had four flat platforms, but few trains stopped there in the morning. The transfer between lines also required a little bit of time.

The train at the first platform was on the Itsukaichi Line which headed to Akigawa. It was currently waiting ten minutes before leaving the way it had come.

The smell of the ramen shop in front of the station filled the front car. A single person sat within it.

It was Sayama. His suit coat was folded in his lap and he was facing forward with his elbow on the handrail.

He was on his way back from the Hiba Dojo and he was as expressionless as ever. However, his face looked somehow contemplative.

He had contacted the dorm earlier, but Shinjou Setsu had still not returned.

"He was not there when I called the dormitory leader last night either. Where has he gone?"

He gave a discouraged sigh.

Sadame likely knew where Setsu was, but she had left the Hiba Dojo before he had woken.

"When I asked old Toshi, she would not give a straight answer."

…Both members of that old couple are very strange.

However, he would have a definite chance of seeing Sadame today.

At eight that evening, the mock battle between Team Leviathan and UCAT was being held at the Showa Memorial Park.

"How should I confront Shinjou-kun there?"

Just as he started to think about both of them, Baku poked his head out of his breast pocket.

The cell phone in that pocket was vibrating.

Sayama stood up and exited onto the platform.

As he felt the chilly air, he took out his cell phone.

"Hello?"

"Oh, S-sayama-kun? This is Shinjou Setsu."

Hearing that voice after so long caused a laugh to escape Sayama's lips.

"A call from you? How rare. Are you doing well?"

"Y-yes. I'm fine."

"Really? Are you sure you were not actually abducted by a shady group when you left school and now they are demanding a ransom? If so, I would like to earn your praise by gracefully resolving the issue."

"S-sorry, but I'm using a pay phone, so I can't talk for long."

"What a shame. So what do you need?"

"Well," said Shinjou. "I will be back at school today at 5:00 PM. Will you be in our room?"

The mock battle in Showa Memorial Park was at 8:00. If they were to gather at 7:30, he could easily arrive if he left school shortly after 6:00, so he nodded.

"That is fine. Five, you said? I promise I will be in our dorm room."

He heard a sigh come from the phone.

It was a sigh of relief.

And just as Sayama wondered what that meant…

"Thank you. It's a promise, then."

Shinjou ended the call.

Sensing a sort of impatience from Shinjou, Sayama stared at his phone.

But no further words would come from that black phone.

He merely heard the bell on the platform indicating the train would soon be leaving.

Chapter 24: Murmur of Tradition

Chapter 24

“Murmur of Tradition”

What will be left for you?
And what will you leave behind?

What will be left for you?

And what will you leave behind?

Behind UCAT's white-walled building was a large green ground that received a lot of sun.

It was a farm. A variety of plants grew there, including flowers and vegetables.

One area grew vegetables in the open and another grew fruits in a greenhouse. However, all of it had been created by workers as a hobby. They had to maintain the plants on their own, so people were almost always visible there.

One person wearing a lab coat sat in front of a flower bed near the forest to the west.

It was Tsukuyomi.

The flower bed in front of her contained a few budding chrysanthemums with the stems and leaves extending from them.

She nodded in satisfaction while looking at the flowers .

“Dear, today is finally the day. We are having the Leviathan Road with Low-Gear.”

She spoke quietly while pulling an old photograph from her pocket.

The photograph showed a man and her while she was still young.

The IAI building stood in the background of the photograph.

“I was the only one that knew nothing until you died in that earthquake.”

She sounded regretful as she looked back and forth between the photo and the flowers.

Suddenly, she realized someone was approaching her.

The woman walking toward her wore a black suit and Tsukuyomi recognized her.

“Diana Zonburg.”

Hearing her name, Diana turned around and stopped next to Tsukuyomi.

“I appear to be rather well known. You are the development department’s director, correct?”

“Yes. Anyone at the director level would know who you are.” Tsukuyomi stood up and took a step back. “ You are the witch that forcibly reformed German UCAT back in ’96. Shortly after that, Sf was created and several types of spell weapons were developed in Germany. I hear all of that was your doing.”

“Oh, my. I take it you do not know anything about me before that.”

“Before that? You mean during UCAT’s blank period? ”

“That’s a secret.” Diana stuck out her tongue a bit. “I still have no intention of telling anyone who does not already know what happened back then. …And I merely wanted to take a nostalgic walk today. Let’s remain silent .”

The witch looked down at the flowers with a smile.

After seeing Tsukuyomi look at them too, she spoke.

"Did you plant these chrysanthemums, Director Tsukuyomi?"

"My husband left them behind. …Did you plant something here long ago?"

"Yes. I planted one of those child-shaped things that yells when you pull it out. …Why are you backing away?"

"There aren't many of the occult type in the development department."

"I see."

Diana nodded and gave a bitter smile.

She crouched down to look closer at the chrysanthemums. After a few seconds, she spoke as if asking for confirmation.

"A lot is going to happen today, isn't it? I am going along to inspect." She took a breath and held her hands out toward the flowers. "Your Gear is choosing a path it cannot turn back from. Why?"

She was obviously testing Tsukuyomi with this question, so Tsukuyomi did not immediately answer.

Tsukuyomi turned toward the back of the UCAT building past the farm and relaxed her shoulders.

“It seems our people have been making swords for UCAT all this time. …As a descendent of the former imperial family, I have some thoughts about the destruction of 2nd-Gear.”

“As a member of the imperial family, you want power instead of peace? Is that why you have agreed to this?”

“Yes, I feel that is best.” Tsukuyomi smiled bitterly toward the ground. “And I have to support the children who are worrying over the same thing, don’t I?”

Diana replied to her joking tone with a small laugh.

That laugh sounded pleasant to Tsukuyomi. It was a decent and authentic laugh.

“Then watch carefully,” said Diana. “Watch the children with the surnames Sayama and Shinjou.”

“Do you know something about those two?”

"A bit," replied Diana. The warm mountain wind brushed up her hair. "Someone with the surname Sayama once appeared before me. And…"

As the wind blew, she paused to choose her words.

"During the great Kansai earthquake, those who wished to be with him chose a path that held no reward."

"Eh? During that earthquake?"

Hearing that question, Diana stood up and bent her eyes in a smile.

"That is all I can say."

"Th-then at least tell me this." Tsukuyomi could not hide her hurry to ask. "The people who, like you, were with Sayama… Were they happy? Even if they received no reward?"

Diana responded with a question of her own.

"Isn't that what you are on your way to find out?" She took a breath. "Just like 1st-Gear did, choose a path from which you cannot turn back and then find out for

yourself. Find out just what kind of villain their child named Sayama is. …I hope the answer you find is the same as that of the person you care for.”

Diana gave a slight smile and turned her back.

Tsukuyomi sighed as she watched the woman walk silently away into the farm.

“My answer…”

She looked down and saw one of the moon-like white chrysanthemums had bloomed.

UCAT’s design room was almost completely deserted.

The clock on the wall indicated it was past noon. Everyone had finished producing weapons for the mock battle. This was the time for making final checks over one ’s own equipment and resting before the battle.

But one man still remained within one of the partitioned spaces.

It was Kashima.

As always, he wore a lab coat over his work uniform, but he did not hold a chisel or a laptop.

He held a bundle of Japanese paper. The paper was the contents of the thick envelope his parents had given him.

He had flipped through over half of the bundle and was on his way to being done. After completing the repairs to Futsuno, he had begun checking through this without taking a rest.

He had not gotten any sleep, but he was surprisingly focused.

He could clearly read the list of names on the Japanese paper before his eyes.

"This handwriting is very tidy."

…Was this written by Ooshiro Hiromasa who once opposed my grandfather?

Two mysteries floated in Kashima's head.

"Why did my grandfather ask for forgiveness on his deathbed?"

And…

"What was in the box on Susaou's bridge that he mentioned?"

Hoping for a hint, he was using the free time before the mock battle to work through these papers.

The writing on the paper was definitely what Ooshiro Hiromasa had written sixty years before.

But the handwriting looked a bit off in places.

The handwriting was confident and steady, but the formation of the characters looked somehow off.

"Is this…?"

Kashima tilted his head as he arrived at a theory.

He removed his glasses and looked at the paper. In his blurry vision, the writing looked fine.

…Was Ooshiro Hiromasa losing his vision?

He did not know why. It could have been overwork, malnutrition…

"Or did some bright light burn his eyes?"

Had Kashima's grandfather known about this?

He gave a long sigh and sat up in his chair.

He flipped another page over.

Only a dozen or so pages remained in his hands.

He looked over the one or two names given and repeated the process about ten more times.

"…"

He was fast approaching the final page.

It seemed to have gone by too quickly. He had not found anything of use.

He nodded once while coming to a reluctant understanding.

But he still resolved himself and flipped to the next page. It would be over soon.

His action revealed the second to last page.

He saw the name written on the white paper that had visible plant fibers.

He recognized the name.

"Kashima?"

The name was written in katakana. Seeing the name caused his pulse to quicken.

…My grandfather…

Hadn't he disliked Ooshiro Hiromasa, hated 2nd-Gear's full acclimation to Low-Gear, and refused to spell the name Kashima with kanji? Then why was this spelling of the name written here by Ooshiro Hiromasa?"

"Could it be that the katakana spelling was given to him by Ooshiro Hiromasa?"

Kashima did not know. And without an answer, he flipped the page to look at the final page. He hoped for an answer there.

But he did not find an answer.

The final page had a name written on it.

But the handwriting was not Ooshiro's.

It was the messy, shaky handwriting of someone unfamiliar with the characters. And from the large X over it, it appeared to be a failed attempt.

Kashima recognized the messy, shaky handwriting.

"That's my grandfather's handwriting."

Kashima looked at the name behind the X of rejection.

He looked at the name his grandfather had written.

The midday sunlight poured down, but there was one place it did not reach: the Kinugasa Library.

It took up eight classrooms' worth of space and was located on the first floor of Taka-Akita Academy's 2nd year general school building.

The walls and windows were covered by bookcases. For the All Holiday Festival, it would become a rest area during the afternoon.

However, only a few people were currently inside the library.

In the center at the lowest level of the stepped floor, Sayama, Izumo, and Kazami sat around a table.

Piles containing hundreds of pieces of copy paper sat in front of Sayama.

These were the contents of the floppy Tsukuyomi had given him the day before. He had already looked through them, but…

"I can't. Even if the countless names are sorted by job, there are too many of them."

Beyond the copy paper, Kazami looked at him with a fed up expression.

"But you seem to be in a good mood. Did something happen?" she asked in a puzzled tone.

"Yes. Shinjou Setsu-kun will be returning this evening. To be honest, I am a bit relieved."

"I see."

As Kazami nodded, Izumo held a bunny picture book far enough away to not hurt his eyes.

"Seeing him sleep with his eyes open is strange, but I'm getting sick of the joke."

"At least he is gradually gaining more variation."

"Anyway." Kazami tapped the documents in front of her. "Ooshiro-san's father realized Yamata's true name when looking through this, right?"

"Yes, but these are the names of the countless gods making up 2nd-Gear. …It is not Kusanagi or Murakumo like we expected."

"What if Yamata's true name is one of these names rather than Kusanagi or Murakumo?"

"Then I will be roasted alive by Yamata."

"…"

Kazami fell silent but shrugged in annoyance.

Someone then walked up next to them.

It was Siegfried. He wore his usual black vest and shirt and he placed three paper cups of coffee on the table.

“It appears you are having difficulties,” he said in his low voice. He nodded. “But I cannot help you.”

“Did you only come over here to mock us?”

“I merely do not want any unneeded expectations, so I felt it would be best to remind you.”

“Thanks for the consideration and the coffee.”

Kazami took a cup and turned toward Izumo.

She then held the cup up to Izumo’s ear as he slept in a perfect reading pose.

“I just have to bend the edge of the cup and…out it pours!”

“Hyoooooh!!”

Izumo shot to his feet while holding his ear.

“Y-you idiot! Wh-what the hell did you do!?”

“You wouldn’t have woken up otherwise.”

“Y-y’know, Chisato. I’m going to give you a wonderfully rich and happy life in the future, so you need to be careful.”

“Sorry, Izumo. I just checked the future with a time machine and you were living under a bridge.”

“Y-you need to bring an end to those crazy delusions.”

“Say that into a mirror next time, Kaku.” Kazami sighed and asked Izumo a question. “What do you think? ”

“Think about what? …Wait, Chisato. Cracking your knuckles like that will mess with the shape of your fingers, so you should really stop. More to the point, I’m opposed to violence”

“Tch. …Fine then. What do you think Yamata’s name is?”

"Isn't it either Kusanagi or Murakumo?"

"And what do you think about the papers in front of you?"

Izumo looked at the piles of paper on the table.

"They're Kusanagi or Murakumo, right?"

"Hm? What do mean?" asked Kazami.

Izumo looked up at the ceiling and thought about what he had said.

"Huh? …I was just making something up, but I guess it didn't really make sense."

"U-um, Kaku? Could you try to think before you speak next time?" Kazami looked troubled and then tilted her head. "There isn't anything weird in this coffee, is there?"

But Sayama realized something while watching the two of them.

…This must be what Izumo was trying to say.

"So if you gather all of these countless names together, they mean either Kusanagi or Murakumo?"

"Yeah, that's it! That's exactly it, Sayama! You're pretty sharp. I wouldn't expect anything less of the vice president who works under me."

"Kazami. Afterwards, the treasurer should give a beating to the idiot who works above me."

"Now's fine with me."

But Siegfried shook his head next to her.

"Listen," he said admonishingly. "People wishing for rest will arrive in the afternoon and normal library guests will come by. I cannot have the library covered in rubble and bodily fluids when they do. Take any violence outside."

Siegfried's instructions brought a displeased look to Izumo's face.

But Sayama ignored him, folded his arms, and spoke.

"Going back to what Izumo said, his reasoning may have been doubtful, but his conclusion is fairly likely.

The countless names may be under the control of the power held by the name Kusanagi or Murakumo."

"Eh? But that power is the wind, right? Are they really under the wind's control?" asked Kazami.

"The wind is ever changing, Kazami," he said with a smile.

"You mean it is in a constant state of flux?" asked Siegfried.

Sayama nodded and spoke to Kazami and Izumo who did not seem to understand.

"Something with no form. Something that is always changing. That which comes and goes. The wind is a symbol of all those things. Is that not the perfect power for that which brings together all the assorted gods, including the weather and their skills?"

And…

"Also, the wind provides the power to increase flames and call in the rain to extinguish them. In that way, Kusanagi and Murakumo are both good terms to control Yamata."

Sayama thought as he looked at the piles of copy paper.

…Did Ooshiro Hiromasa ask a certain question when he saw all these names?

What was 2nd-Gear if it ruled over all these things?

That thought brought Sayama relief.

They had already predicted it, but now he had support for their thoughts.

"But the real question is which name is the truth of 2nd-Gear. Are the countless gods of 2nd-Gear ruled by Kusanagi which travels along the earth or Murakumo which travels through the heavens?"

"In other words, are they gods or are they men?" asked Kazami to no one in particular.

At that point, someone opened the library door and entered.

The person looking around for someone was Ooki.

"What is it, Ooki-sensei? Have you made yet another clumsy mistake?"

"N-no, I haven't."

Ooki walked over with long strides and held out an envelope.

"The dormitory head gave me this just now. It is a personal letter for you, Sayama-kun."

"For me?"

Confused, Sayama took the envelope and frowned when he saw the sender's name.

It said "Shinjou Sadame".

Two people stood in the large lobby on the first floor of UCAT headquarters.

One was Shinjou who wore an orange jacket, a white shirt, and a skirt. The other was Ooshiro who wore a lab coat.

Ooshiro scratched his head below the painting of the Virgin Mary.

"2nd-Gear has begun preparing for the mock battle, so should you really be here?"

"No, I shouldn't. …But I am about to bring an end to something important."

"Bring an end to something important?"

Shinjou nodded, lowered her head, and chose her words carefully.

"Setsu called Sayama-kun and told him to wait at school until 5:00 PM," she said. "But Sadame sent him a letter telling him to come to UCAT's rooftop at 4:00 PM so she can tell him something important."

Ooshiro gasped.

Shinjou understood why.

"Yes. It takes an hour and a half to travel between school and UCAT. …Sayama-kun will have to choose between Setsu and Sadame."

"Are you okay with that?"

"Yes," she answered after a short pause.

But she smiled while lightly pinching the edge of her skirt.

"I know which one he will choose."

"…"

"So if he contacts you, don't let him talk to me. I want to reveal my lie once he chooses."

Shinjou looked further into the lobby.

A red-tiled staircase was located to the side. If she climbed that staircase past the fifth floor, she would arrive at the rooftop.

She muttered to herself while looking at that staircase which disappeared upwards.

"This is my answer, isn't it?" She sighed. "Itaru-san took me in, but I wonder what he would think about me casting aside Setsu."

"I don't know," answered Ooshiro with a sigh.

Shinjou turned toward him and he looked at her with the ends of his eyebrows lowered.

"Don't give me that look, Ooshiro-san."

"But…"

She nodded toward his disappointed look and spoke cheerfully so he would not worry.

"I'm on my way to give my answer."

It was 2:10 PM.

After checking Shinjou Sadame's letter in his dorm room, Sayama needed to make a decision.

He had to choose between Sadame and Setsu.

"She wants to tell me something important, hm?"

Sayama sighed after repeating what Sadame had written in her letter.

He turned toward the empty bed.

“Isn’t this too sudden Shinjou…Sadame-kun? I wanted to speak with Setsu-kun as well.”

He reached for the desk next to the bed and picked something up.

It was something Shinjou Setsu had left with him.

“This may be the perfect time. I will make up my mind how I will face you as well.”

As he looked at what he held, Sayama regulated his breathing.

He prepared to silently face something.

And he slowly spoke a single question.

“Do you remember what it means to tell a story, Shinjou-kun?”

Chapter 25: False Name

Chapter 25

“False Name”

Something you wanted to say for so long
Something you have long searched for
Something you have avoided for exactly that reason

Something you wanted to say for so long

Something you have long searched for

Something you have avoided for exactly that reason

The setting sun illuminated a staircase.

The tiles of the staircase currently held a single purpose. They carried someone up the stairs with loud footsteps.

And the person producing those footsteps was none other than Shinjou.

She ran up and up.

The meeting place lay beyond the staircase. Her answer lay there.

Her shoulders rose and fell as she gasped for breath, proving that she had been running in her rush to arrive.

The hem of her skirt was a bit wrinkled and her jacket had slipped from one shoulder, but her expression retained its strength. She brushed up her bangs.

"Sayama-kun…"

Muttering that name, she grabbed and turned the doorknob in front of her.

As the door opened, she did not see the UCAT rooftop she had designated as the meeting place.

It was a student dorm room.

The wristwatch on the arm holding the knob indicated it was just before 6 PM.

As night approached and the sounds of the All Holiday Festival could be heard in the distance, Shinjou muttered quietly.

"Why?"

In the space Shinjou had opened, someone sat in a chair by the window.

Sayama sat there. He faced her with a smile and with Baku on his shoulder.

Seeing the smile in his almond-shaped eyes, Shinjou regulated her breathing and asked again.

“Why?”

“Why what?” he asked back.

Shinjou stepped forward into the room and shut the door behind her.

“Wh-why didn’t you come to UCAT? I waited for over half an hour and you didn’t show up, so I-I hurried here. I could only think you were waiting for Setsu here!”

“I see. Shinjou-kun, let me ask you this.” He took a breath and spoke as if confirming something he already knew. “Then why would I need to go to UCAT?”

Shinjou reflexively raised both her shoulders. She clenched both her fists as they hung down next to her body.

“B-because…!”

…Why doesn't he understand?

"You had always chosen Sadame! I wanted you to definitively choose and decide on Sadame! But…but you …!"

As she spoke, strength left her legs and she could no longer support herself.

…Why won't he give me an answer?

As she thought, Shinjou slowly leaned back against the door. She almost sank down along the metal door.

"What…what am I supposed to do?"

In her blurry and sinking vision, she saw Sayama stand from the chair.

He approached.

This surprised her, so she bent her waist and pressed against the door as if trying to escape.

But the door remained closed. She could not escape.

She merely lowered her hips and embraced her own chest while crouching down.

"S-stay back, Sayama-kun. Right now… Right now I'm …"

"I understand. Or perhaps I should say I understand *now*."

Just as his voice came from directly in front of her, Sayama lightly embraced her.

"No…"

He ignored her resisting voice and picked up her crouching body.

She could no longer escape.

"Mh…"

She let out a groan of protest and saw his serious expression before her.

But she could not bear having him simply stare at her like that, so she opened her mouth.

"S-Sayama-kun? You said….that you understand. What do you mean?"

Sayama responded with a single action.

He looked behind him.

He looked toward the desk by the window. Shinjou also saw what sat there.

"Is that…?"

It was Shinjou Setsu's binder.

"Shinjou-kun, I just read the plot Setsu-kun wrote. …It is the story of an impertinent and foolish boy who negotiates and fights with the remnants of ten alternate worlds in order to fulfill his grandfather's final request."

And…

"That is something Setsu-kun should not have known about."

"S-Sadame might have told him."

"Can you really say 'might have' about your own actions? …But the answer is quite simple. I had thought I had cast aside all common sense when dealing with creatures like the old man and Izumo, but I am such a sensible person that I seem to have slipped up here. I must return to my initial assumption."

With the festival music in the distance, Shinjou listened to him speak.

"Shinjou-kun, you are both Setsu-kun and Sadame-kun, aren't you?"

Sayama looked at Shinjou who was in his arms and between him and the door.

She did not answer his question. She remained motionless and stared back at him with wavering eyes.

Her silence and motionlessness eloquently gave him his answer. She was saying his statement was accurate.

…But I will not receive an immediate answer no matter what I ask now.

And so he attempted to embrace her further. He wanted to check on a certain fact.

As he drew her closer, Shinjou drew back.

“S-stop. I-I…”

“As your opposite, I can only view those as words of approval.”

“Eh? Um… Th-then go right ahead.”

“Gladly.”

“Waah!”

Shinjou cried out in protest as Sayama held her close.

Her chest pressed against his and he found the answer he wanted.

The body pressed against his was that of Shinjou Setsu .

“D-do you understand now? You can’t do this, Sayama-kun. You can’t do this with a guy…”

"Then when can I do this?"

After some slight hesitation, Shinjou answered.

"When I become Sadame. …So decide. All sorts of people have looked at me funny in the past, but which one will you choose?"

Shinjou went on to clearly speak about herself.

"I live alternatively as Sadame and Setsu, so I will match the other to the one you choose."

Shinjou's hesitant words were accompanied by a look that said "I finally said it."

Sayama nodded toward her uneasy expression. He spoke to her again as if telling her to calm down.

"Shinjou-kun, I am willing to give you an answer, but may I ask you something first?"

"Wh-what?"

"You said you live alternatively as both, but what do you mean by that?"

After a short delay, she nodded and answered.

"I can't change at will. My body changes between them on its own. I'm Setsu right now, but I will become Sadame after a while. So…"

She tried to say "decide", but she fell silent and trembled slightly.

She was trembling in fear. That drove home the fact that she was telling the truth.

And so Sayama gently patted her back while embracing her like he had done on that night.

"I see. And because of that, you think I will choose Sadame-kun?"

"…Yes. That would be normal, right? Setsu would just cause you problems. So I made up my mind this morning . If you choose Sadame, I will act like a girl from now on. " She gave a resigned smile. "And Sadame can stay with you as long as the Leviathan Road lasts."

I get it now, thought Sayama. *Her thoughts were based in consideration toward me.*

He was a boy, so she would act accordingly.

"I see. Shinjou-kun, let me say one thing before I give my answer."

He had something to say to her once more.

"You are right."

"…Eh?"

Sayama spoke to her surprised face.

"Your choice was right. You suppress yourself, but you hurt no one. And you keep you and your surroundings from changing." Sayama tilted his head. " But if you do that, how am I supposed to do something wrong as a villain? You said this just now: *Sadame can stay with me as long as the Leviathan Road lasts.* But that means something else as well. If I choose Sadame, I can only see you during the Leviathan Road."

Sayama recalled the misunderstandings over the past few days and the feelings Shinjou had given him.

How pathetic, he thought in self-deprecation.

He went on to swear never to let that happen again.

"I will now give my answer, Shinjou-kun. There is only one person I could possibly choose."

"A-and…"

The look in her eyes said "which one is that", so he immediately answered.

"I cannot choose Sadame-kun or Setsu-kun. I choose you, Shinjou-kun. I want you to remain as you are."

"I-I can't do that!"

"That sounds like praise to me. And so let me say this: today, you came to me. From now on, I too will go wherever you are. I will go there to be mistaken. And together we can be mistaken in the right way."

…Perhaps I should not speak my feelings any more than this.

Sayama moved in towards Shinjou's face.

"S-stop! You may be eccentric and crazy, but you'll regret this. And I'll be treated like some precious treasure like I used to be. I can't force something like that onto you. I-…"

Sayama sealed her lips with his own.

Shinjou swallowed her breath and weakly tried to escape, but Sayama tilted his head and would not let her escape. He used his own lips to bite sideways onto her soft and round lips.

And he pulled her lips forward so that she faced forward.

"Nn…Mh."

They both closed their eyes. As he felt both their breaths, Sayama held her tightly.

The tension in Shinjou's body did not lessen, but it did not strengthen either.

He let go of her lips and felt her warm breath. Her long hair was in slight disarray.

"Why…? You'll regret this. You're kissing a boy's body right now…"

Sayama ignored her and placed his lips on hers again.

"…"

Shinjou opened her eyes but closed them again.

They both took a breath and their lips separated once more.

"Shinjou-kun, as long as you dislike this, I will keep doing it."

"Th-then I like it…"

"Then I shall give you what you want."

He did it a third time.

"Y-you're a liar, Sayama-kun."

"I try to follow my true desires and live a modest life, you know?"

Sayama grinned bitterly at how their actions did not suit the festival sounds outside.

"Now, Shinjou-kun. I would like to ask you one thing first. …Would you allow me that?"

"Eh?" asked Shinjou with a troubled expression.

"If possible, I would like to see all of you once more so that I can confirm your lie."

"You mean…you want to confirm that I am not just one or the other?"

"Yes."

Shinjou blushed and hung her head down.

But she finally swung her head down slightly.

She nodded.

On the roof of UCAT's white-walled building, two people stood below the twilight-covered sky.

The people who wore all black were Ooshiro Itaru and Sf.

Sf looked at Itaru. He was looking toward Tokyo to the east.

"Itaru-sama, I have determined that we need to leave for Showa Memorial Park soon."

"Do not rush things. For once, I am lost in emotion."

"Tes. I have determined that this is a rare case. Should I take a commemorative photograph?"

Itaru turned around to find Sf had set up a large camera.

"Tes. Say cheese. …What is that look for, Itaru-sama?"

"Should a German machine really use the English word 'cheese'?"

"I am made to global standards. That does not include the north, however. But…"

Itaru sighed and spoke what he had predicted she was going to say.

"Shinjou has become a boring person, too."

"She was here for a while, but she quickly grew tired of it."

"Yes." Itaru nodded and looked up at the stars visible in the sky. "In the end, she left to create meaning for herself. She has opposed fate and met Sayama."

As he spoke, smoke rose into the air and a flash blinded him.

"Tes. I took a photograph. I determined that expression was worth capturing on film."

Before Sayama's eyes, Shinjou sat on the bed with her skirt and socks removed.

The ends of her eyebrows were still lowered, but her face was red.

"Please take care of the rest…"

With that said, she slowly tumbled back onto the bed. She placed the pillow under her head and clasped her arms below that.

She lightly raised her right knee and intertwined her legs, but she could no longer hide her body with her arms clasped beneath the pillow. Sayama's only obstacles were the shirt and white panties she wore.

He nodded and leaned forward over her body.

Shinjou gasped in response.

He stroked her head to calm her down and kissed her once. This produced a pale smile.

After seeing her nod, he placed his fingers on the shirt below his eyes.

He rested his left elbow on the bed and used the hand to stroke her head. Meanwhile, his right hand undid the buttons.

"You can see now, can't you?"

As the white cloth opened, her pale flesh became visible underneath.

Her slender and delicate white body was covered in sweat and it rose and fell as she breathed.

The damp sweat reflected the room's light and it had been produced by more than just her run here.

Sayama's gaze started at her navel which trembled as she breathed and then moved up in a line. It stopped when their gazes met.

With a serious expression, he tried to tell her to calm down.

"You are wonderfully erotic, Shinjou-kun."

"I-I don't think that's what you're supposed to say here."

"My apologies. It seems my mind superseded my words."

As he spoke, Sayama's hands approached Shinjou's last piece of clothing.

He looked toward her and she gave a blushing nod while almost entirely closing her eyes.

He nodded back and lowered her panties to her knees.

With a quiet shriek, she drew her body back on the bed.

She tried to press her knees together, but her panties had already passed that point.

Sayama twisted the panties around her ankles and off of her toes.

“Ah.”

With a look of surprise, she saw her panties in his hands.

He folded them and placed them on top of her skirt.

“Now, Shinjou-kun, please spread your legs. I want to see clearly if you are currently a boy.”

“U-um, Sayama-kun. Once you see that I’m a boy…”

"This could become troublesome, so let me say this up front: I was not kissing Setsu-kun or Sadame-kun earlier. I was kissing you, Shinjou-kun. …How about we put it to the test here? Let us see whether I regret it or not."

Shinjou lowered her eyelids slightly, strength left her eyebrows, and her lips moved.

"…"

She spread her slightly raised elbows and fully exposed her face.

At the same time, she relaxed her stiff knees and spread them.

She exposed her body.

Her shirt was hiding her shoulders and arms, but her chest was exposed.

Her legs spread apart as if creating a mountain to the left and right.

"Can you see me now?"

"I can."

"W-well? Do you suddenly regret kissing me just now ?"

"Not at all. I apologize for not living up to your expectations, Shinjou-kun."

Shinjou provided a single reaction.

She let out a breath and all strength left her body and expression.

Tears welled up at the corners of her eyes and she spoke in a trembling voice.

"What time is it?"

"According to the alarm clock by the bed, it is 5:58 PM. The festival outside should end soon."

"Then it shouldn't be long," said Shinjou in a relieved voice.

And Sayama suddenly noticed a change.

The air around them moved slightly. It was as if a gentle breeze was whirling around the two of them.

“What is this?”

As he looked around, he saw a change in Shinjou’s expression.

She gave a satisfied smile.

“Watch, Sayama-kun. Since you did not regret your decision, I want you to see my lie.”

As she spoke, the wind came. Along with the wind, something like white mist rose around her body and she closed her eyes.

Sayama watched as her sweaty body seemed to waver a bit below the mist.

終わりのクロニクル

"Your body…"

Shinjou's body changed. It was not that it gradually transformed. It looked more like it had been swapped out.

The change happened in an instant. By the time Sayama took in another breath, the gentle wind and thin mist had vanished.

Only Shinjou's sweat-covered body remained before his eyes.

But this was not a boy's body. The chest of this girl's body swelled up.

Just as he heard the announcement of the end of the day's festival, Shinjou's lips uttered the words that indicated everything about herself.

"This is Sadame's body, Sayama-kun."

As all sound vanished from outside, Shinjou was painfully aware that she was revealing everything about herself to Sayama.

She wondered what she was doing and she wondered if this would be the end of it all.

"Do you understand? This is why I am pursuing my parents. I don't know what Gear I am from."

"Do you change sex at a set time every day?"

"Yes… It is usually between 5:30 to 6:00 both in the morning and evening. That's why I am always a boy when taking a bath in the evening."

"You always did that?"

"Yes. I would always take a bath and then wait in the dorm bathroom until the change happened. After eating dinner, I would be a girl, so I was really surprised when you got in bed with me before. …It wasn't easy. To make sure you wouldn't catch on, I would go to the bathroom. Ooshiro-san and the others would send airplanes and helicopters flying around to create an alibi."

Also…

"In UCAT, I wore female equipment even as a boy because only Sadame was part of UCAT."

"I see. But why were those adults so intent on hiding this?"

"I think they like making a big deal out of everything. …I'm thankful, though."

There was something else she had to say.

"I'm sorry for deceiving you. This is my lie. So…"

Her voice trembled.

"You can do with me as you wish."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You remember, don't you? You've saved my life twice. Once when we first met and once when we faced Fafnir Custom."

And more importantly, he had also saved her with his will and attitude several times.

"Sayama-kun, I have no right to complain even if you kill me, so I won't be able to stand it if you don't do with me as you wish. Even if you deny me, hate me, or hold a grudge for deceiving you, I will bear with it. Whether as Sadame or Setsu, I will act in accordance with your choice."

After all…

"That is just how much I want to be with you."

Those words brought sudden tears to her eyes. She had resisted this far, so why were they flowing out now? She did not like how it looked like she was asking for pity.

And then she heard him speak.

"Shinjou-kun, let us settle this in a simple manner. … Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you."

"…Eh?"

"I am not choosing Sadame-kun or Setsu-kun. …I am choosing your true name. I want to be with your true self ."

Those words caused her to tremble.

Sayama nodded when he saw her expression. She guessed it was one of surprise.

"The girl Sadame-kun and the boy Setsu-kun were names separated to make life here in Low-Gear more convenient. You should have an original name that your parents gave you. …That is why I would like to ask your name."

"Y-you can't…"

"Why not?"

"My true name…would be a bad omen for you. I can't tell you such an ominous name just before we go to fight 2nd-Gear where names have power."

"I do not care. Tell me. I will not agree to anything else ."

Sayama's tone was one hundred percent serious, so Shinjou swallowed her trembling breath and made up her mind.

…Fine. I'll reveal everything.

That boy wanted the true form of her that not even she had been willing to accept.

Shinjou spoke before she could try to oppose that thought.

"Sadagiri."[3]

She took a deep breath.

"The name that cuts life from destiny."[4]

…Why do I have this name? Cutting life from destiny makes it sound like…

"I will probably bring an end to your life, Sayama-kun."

But his answer was different.

"You are wrong, Shinjou-kun." He smiled, brushed his hand through her hair, stroked her head, and spoke with strength in his tone. "I do not believe in destiny. So you are the person who cuts away the bonds of destiny, freeing my life."

His words were followed by a lowered kiss that she accepted.

After a few seconds, he slowly removed his lips and pressed his cheek and ear between her breasts.

"Ah."

Shinjou shrank back, but she was unable to keep him from hearing her heartbeat.

Is it beating fast? He'll probably realize how nervous I am, she thought.

"Sadagiri-kun, as long as this pulse and your will remain unchanged, I will continue to choose you."

Sayama nodded at his own comment and stood up.

"Now that this is mostly settled, let us check on the situation."

"The…situation?" asked Shinjou.

She looked at his and her own body and he nodded as she looked at him.

"You are in quite a dangerous state, Shinjou-kun. Your legs are spread most wonderfully."

"Ah! N-no, this is..um…I-I…!"

"Ha ha ha. Is this what I think it is? That phenomenon where the most serious people head down the most eccentric paths when they do not know what to do? You need to keep your composure, Shinjou-kun."

"Y-you're the eccentric one!"

Shinjou pulled her arms from under the pillow, covered her face, and closed her knees around him.

"S-Sayama-kun, move…move out of the way. I-I can't close my legs."

"Calm down, Shinjou-kun. If you did that, I would not be able to see this any longer."

"Y-you need to calm down. Um? Y'know, Sayama-kun ? I know that you are always completely crazy while

looking perfectly calm, but you need to calm down a bit now."

"I see. Izumo or the old man would be one thing, but it sounds almost persuasive coming from you."

"R-right? So take a deep breath and practice moving aside."

Sayama took a deep breath and then moved both of Shinjou's legs to either side.

"N-no!! Wh-what are you doing!?"

"Is this not what you meant?"

"Don't ask that with such a serious look on your face! Please just think normally for once."

"Hm…"

After he had thought for a few seconds, panic filled Shinjou's face.

"Th-there's no hope! You've probably gone well past normal by now."

"Why are you so skeptical? I was merely thinking of a normal way to spread your legs."

"Not even your base assumption is normal…"

"I see. Then may I do one sensible thing?"

"Eh? I suppose s- No, wait! I can't agree to a meaningless question based on your definition of sensible! Nothing good has ever come of that combination!"

"What a troublesome person. Are you aware that people like you make everything needlessly difficult?"

"Sayama-kun, do you ever have any thoughts about your own actions?"

"I am always thinking about myself. 'I am wonderful,' reports my brain. What more do I need?"

Shinjou turned to the side with a cold smile on her face .

"I don't think anyone but me could fix this…"

"Then I will not hold back."

"I said no. Were you even listening to- What are you doing!?"

"Exactly what you wanted. You asked me to do with you as I wish."

"Ah," said Shinjou as her expression stiffened. "Um, I-I may have said that. But now that I have calmed down, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"My personality is not between my legs, you know?"

"True, but do not worry. Finding empathy in all things is an important trait. If I try, even the space between your legs is no excepti- Gwoh!?"

After she forced a knee up and into his gut, Sayama doubled over.

"A-an excellent attack. Heh heh. I see you are showing no hesitation, Shinjou-kun."

"Now that you know I can attack from this position… wh-what will you do?"

"I merely wish to check on one thing," he said.

Shinjou frowned.

"Um…"

"What is there to think about? You must only ask me what it is."

"Yes, but asking you that is like taking a flying leap onto a nuclear landmine."

She thought.

"I-it's fine as long as it's nothing inappropriate."

"Then there is nothing to worry about."

Sayama took a breath and smiled.

"Is it true that you do not have a perio- gfh!"

"Has the Japanese dictionary changed since last time I checked?"

"I-I have a feeling Japan's communication has grown quite a bit more direct. At any rate, Shinjou-kun, this is

important. Stop glaring at me with those half-lidded eyes . Listen. If what you said before is true, I cannot embrace you yet."

"Eh? W-wait a second. There's a lot I want to ask about …but what do you mean by 'embrace'?"

"An imagination is vital for a human being, Shinjou-kun."

"Y-yes, but…you feel about me that way?" she asked while hiding her chest and the area between her legs with her hands. "But you said you can't do it. Is that because of how I am?"

"No. It is a simple matter. Sexual intercourse can affect the balance of growth in an undeveloped body."

"Okay."

"For example, a certain boy had intercourse while very young and this caused him to grow."

This was an event from the past.

"It stopped at a point, but the insides of his bones were unable to keep up. During a certain sports competition,

his fist broke when it struck his opponent and he still has phantom pains when he clenches his fist."

"…Does that boy regret it?"

"No. But he feels there is no reason to rush things."

"I see." Shinjou nodded. "But I might never have a period. I might always be a half-formed person like this. It seems UCAT knows of no race that matches my condition."

"Is that so? Then we do not know if you will ever have a period."

Sayama touched her navel and she gave a light gasp.

"But you said you feel a weight in your stomach once a month. It is possible your desire to avoid your condition is stopping your body from functioning properly. Do you also have nothing while you are Setsu-kun?"

After thinking for a moment, Shinjou nodded.

But then she tilted her head with a troubled expression .

"Do boys have a period too?"

"It would be fairly horrifying if it gushed out once a month, but there is something similar."

Shinjou started thinking and slowly nodded a few times.

But then her expression suddenly brightened.

"So if I accept my body…?"

"It is possible your period and the like will appear. So how about you continually try some actions that will convince your body? We can see what happens from there."

"But what kind of actions would those be?"

"It is a simple matter. Merely explore your own body. …You can do that on your own I assume."

"Eh? On my own? D-do what on my own?"

Sayama mentally tilted his head at her confused question.

…Do not tell me she is completely ignorant of this.

He wondered what this meant, but he was not entirely sure he should ask.

"Shinjou-kun, how were your grades in health class?"

"I-I never had anything like that. I've spent all my time in UCAT facilities. I would sometimes see some amazing things in magazines people left behind, though."

"It seems your education skipped a few steps. So does that mean you do not know about any of this?"

"R-right. I know a bit about how a baby is made, but is there something more than that?"

"There is. For both boys and girls."

Shinjou blushed when she heard that.

"So there is," she muttered before tilting her head. " Th-then will you teach me?"

"Are you fine with me teaching you that?"

"I-I don't have anyone else to teach me."

"Then I will- gwoh!! Wh-what was that for?"

"S-sorry. I didn't like the look of the refreshing smile on your face. …Oh, but you will teach me those things, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"You look incredibly happy. Are you aware what you look like right now?"

Shinjou sighed and relaxed her shoulders.

"I will trust you, Sayama-kun. But that means I will be causing you a lot of trouble."

"No need to worry. I have little experience myself, so I eagerly await working with you."

"I'm not sure I agree with that last part…but I'm really sorry." She nodded. "Once I learn some things, I can return the favor, so will you forgive me?"

"I think you will regret saying that once you learn what you are talking about, but I am perfectly okay with it. I look forward to it."

"Eh? L-look forward to what exactly?"

"Let us both give this our all."

"Um, uh, well…"

Shinjou looked fearful, but then she turned to the side.

"U-um, it's already 6:30. W-we need to get to the Showa Memorial Park."

"You are right. We must hurry. Yes. We must hurry and finish up here."

"Ah! Stop! Wh-why are you spreading my legs!?"

"In all things, the beginning is important, Shinjou-kun. I cannot have you changing your mind later. …Do not worry." He took a breath and smiled. "I am nervous as well. I would like to hear your pulse. How about you, Shinjou Sadagiri-kun?"

"W-well…" She thought. "Yes."

Shinjou relaxed her body in resignation.

She blushed, looked toward him, and spoke quietly.

“Please teach me so that I can be who I truly am.”

The Showa Memorial Park had a large parking lot to the south.

Several disguised UCAT transport vehicles were parked below the mercury lamps illuminating the night.

The vehicles formed a semicircle to prevent anyone on the outside from seeing them. Several people could be seen in the light. Two groups of about one hundred had formed separate large circles.

The people forming both circles wore the same white and black outfits.

But different atmospheres hung over the two groups.

The circle further in and nearer to the center of the park was made up of people with the distinctive traits of the Japanese. They quietly checked over their guns and swords and looked like they could take action at any moment.

The closer circle had no common traits. The people's races were all different and their actions were different. Some prepared equipment, some spoke to each other, and some ate.

And one person was quite angry.

"Ahhh! Where is that idiot Sayama!?"

Kazami's loud voice filled the air. She sat at the meeting desk in the center of the circle. She already wore her combat uniform, as did Izumo next to her who ate an okonomiyaki on a stick that he had bought at a mobile food stand.

"Well, he wouldn't try to run from the fight, so don't panic."

"B-but it's already 7:20. The mock battle is about to begin. Director Abram called out to me in his role as referee and I didn't know what to say."

"Sibyl is contacting him. Also, Doctor Chao and those four elderly brothers are prepared to go get them, so just wait a bit. …Ah."

Izumo looked to the side.

“Eh?”

Kazami looked over as well with her mouth hanging half open.

And then he stuck the okonomiyaki into her mouth, stick and all.

“If you’re impatient, just eat something and calm down. You haven’t been eating recently because the school band’s costume shows your midriff, right? You don’t have enough nutrients for your brain. And if you keep it up, your tits will shrin-…gahh!?”

After kicking him away as hard as she could, Kazami sighed.

She ate about half of the okonomiyaki and then pulled it from her mouth.

“Honestly, this puts me at 300 calories over my daily limit.”

"I think you just more than exceeded your daily limit of violence. Anyway, are you going to eat the whole thing?"

"Is that a problem? …Wait, this has an egg in it. That's another 100 kilocalories!"

"Chisato, you need to do something about that habit of getting yourself worked up. Also, you shouldn't calculate your calories in kilo units. That gets you into the hundreds and thousands before you know it."

"Is there a better way of doing it?"

"Think of it in mega units."

"I've had 1800 kilocalories today, so…"

"That's 1.8 megacalories. You feel lighter now, don't you!?"

"What good is it if it's only how you feel!?"

As she sent a barrage of blows at him, Sibyl approached.

Her golden hair swayed among the ring of people who had gathered around them at some point.

“Chisato-sama, I have word from Sayama-sama.”

“He’s here!?”

“No, he is not. I was concerned, so I called his student dormitory.”

“He’s still there!?”

“No, I just spoke with the dorm head and it seems he just left.”

“What is he, a soba delivery boy!?”

“Chisato-sama, your blood pressure appears to be a bit high.”

“Uuh…” Kazami flinched back. “Sorry. Yelling at you isn’t going to help.”

“Chisato, why are you acting so much different than with me?”

Kazami ignored him. He started to pretend to cry, but she ignored that as well.

"Anyway, does that mean he's definitely coming?" she asked Sibyl.

"Yes, and it seems Shinjou-sama is with him. The two of them will certainly be here."

"That is good to hear," said a female voice.

Everyone turned toward the voice which came from beyond the crowd.

An elderly woman wearing a white combat cloak stood in the gentle night breeze outside the circle.

The crowd split apart and she appeared while holding a black leather case.

Sibyl was the one who spoke the woman's name.

"Director Tsukuyomi."

"Yes. More importantly, are you ready?"

"Well…" Kazami scratched at her head. "Sayama and Shinjou have yet to arrive, but they do seem to be on their way."

"But he will be here, won't he? So what should we do? Do we wait?"

"That will not be necessary. We can continue on," said a male voice within the crowd.

A white-haired man in a black suit and a white-haired maid appeared between Tsukuyomi and Kazami. The man arrived in the circle using a metal cane and his eyes smiled behind his sunglasses.

"Let us begin the Leviathan Road. I, Ooshiro Itaru, use my authority as Team Leviathan's supervisor to proceed without those two team members."

"Y-y'know…"

Just as Kazami frowned and turned toward Itaru, Itaru 's maid silently stepped in front of her. She shook her white bangs once and looked up at the girl.

"If you need something, I will take care of it."

"Call him an asshole."

"Tes."

Sf bowed and pulled a paper card from a hidden pocket in her skirt. She also pulled out a small stamp and used it on the card.

"Thank you for using my services. I have recently begun using this point card, so please present it to me next time. If you collect twenty points, I will buy a can of coffee for you."

"I guess an unbelievable master *would* have an unbelievable maid."

"You honor me with your praise. According to the standards of German UCAT's development department, you have moved up one place on my internal priority list and Izumo-sama has fallen three. Two more lost places and Izumo-sama will be disqualified."

"Wait a minute. Why am I so low?"

Sf and Kazami both ignored him. Sf handed her the card and moved back to Itaru.

Kazami looked at the card and saw the stamp was a super-deformed version of Sf's face.

What is this? she thought with a sigh.

She looked around and spotted Diana in the crowd as well. She wore a black combat outfit and she waved when she noticed Kazami looking at her.

"That huge-breasted foreigner might be smiling, but she's inspecting us," commented Izumo.

"I think that was two kinds of discrimination at once. …But what do mean she's inspecting us?"

"The foreign UCATs don't like that Japan is taking the leading role in the Leviathan Road. She's looking for some reason to interfere in the Leviathan Road."

"You mean that was German UCAT's intention all this time?"

"Yes, that's why they agreed to take in 1st-Gear. French UCAT is acting pro-Germany to share in the benefit. American UCAT is working with British UCAT to find some way of influencing us. …Then again, it seems that woman has a hidden reason for being here

beyond inspecting us." He took a breath. "At any rate, Sayama and Shinjou not arriving on time and what happens in the mock battle are going to reach the other UCATs through her. We need to be careful."

What a pain, thought Kazami.

She looked over again, but Diana was already gone.

The woman's pleasant smile and Izumo's warning filled her mind and she wondered which one was true.

"They're probably both true."

When she had joined their training, she had indeed provided a hint concerning 2nd-Gear's Art of Walking.

It might make her naïve, but Kazami decided to trust her.

"But she really is inspecting us, so we need to stay focused."

Kazami turned toward Tsukuyomi. The woman put her hands on her hips and smiled, so Kazami put as much strength into her gaze as she could.

"Fine, let's begin. You can decide on the rules."

"The rules are simple. We will enter the concept space on the southeastern side and you will enter on the southwestern side. The first one to reach Susaou in the center and acquire Totsuka from its bridge will be the winner."

"If we win, will you accept all of Low-Gear's demands ?"

"Yes. But even if we win, we will not really demand anything." Tsukuyomi nodded. "This may seem like a meaningless battle, but it will set some things straight. It will make us rethink what it means to be the people of 2nd-Gear."

She looked around for a moment.

"It is a bit disappointing that your negotiator is not here. …Is UCAT Director Ooshiro not here either?"

Next to Itaru, Sf turned around in response to that question.

"It seems Kazuo-sama left UCAT not long ago. He says Sayama-sama contacted him, so he prepared Georgius and a few other things before leaving."

"Oh? So he is coming. And with Georgius, hm?"

"You know about Georgius, Director Tsukuyomi?" asked Kazami.

"I know that we know nothing about it." A smile appeared on Tsukuyomi's lips. "That's an idea. If you win, the development department will investigate Georgius free of charge. How does that sound? We might learn something about it."

Chapter 26: Beginning of the Confrontation

Chapter 26

“Beginning of the Confrontation”

Let the festival begin
The sky and moon are excellent tonight
And an excellent will blows through

Let the festival begin

The sky and moon are excellent tonight

And an excellent will blows through

The chilly night wind brushed across Okutama.

Below the moon, occasional houses produced light along the wind-filled mountains and forests.

One of those houses was the Kashima household. It bordered a stepped paddy field and bright light fell on its yard.

That light illuminated a single figure walking away from the porch.

The figure wore a lab coat. He was Ooshiro Kazuo.

He held something under his right arm. It was a bottle wrapped in brown paper.

He lightly tapped the bottle with his right hand and turned a smile toward the porch.

"This was a nice thing to receive. And we should be able to meet our opponents' demands. …Thank you."

Sitting on the porch was an elderly man in a running shirt and work pants. He was Kashima's father.

He held a cigarette in his mouth.

"Hah. You can take it. It's my payment for talking about old times for so long. More importantly, are you still up to no good, you perverted old man?"

"I see you're still as nonchalant as ever, you eccentric old man."

"Heh. Nothing good is gonna come from a meeting between a man from the first naturalized generation and a man born during the war. You didn't even come to my old man's funeral."

"Yeah, but you had decided not to have anything to do with UCAT."

Ooshiro's sulking comment produced a shushing noise from Kashima's father.

Ooshiro turned a questioning gaze toward him as he looked into the house.

"Aki's wife is here. She doesn't know about UCAT, so don't speak so loud. In fact, get out of here. If possible, just disappear altogether."

"I kind of want to stick around and see what lies you use to introduce me."

"Wa ha ha. Is that so? Then I'll say you're a new kind of panty thief and throw you in the storehouse."

"Being thrown in storehouses has been my special skill since I was a kid. …More importantly, what kind of person is Akio-kun's wife?"

"Excuse me while I go call the police. I need to report a pervert who's after someone's young wife."

"You're right, Kashima. Turning yourself in is always the best choice. The holding cell is cold this time of year, so I might bring you something hot to eat."

"You'll be the one in the cell, you stupid old man! And how do you know the cells are cold!?"

This time Ooshiro shushed Kashima's father.

Kashima's father clicked his tongue and Ooshiro sniffed a bit.

"Something smells good. Is that fuki tsukudani? If so, your main dish tonight must be fish or beef. You might add tofu too."

"Stop trying to guess what we're having for dinner. Our miso soup has nappa cabbage in it, but we aren't giving any to you, so leave."

"Hmm. Can I say one thing?"

Kashima's father's expression said "what?" and Ooshiro pointed at him with a serious expression.

"A stingy old man like you must not have any friends. "

"Unlike you, I have friends in the neighborhood association! I've heard all about you from Aki. He says you spend all your time in your room playing

pornographic games. He's worried you might not be right in the head."

"Ah! He's leaking our secrets! Anyway, how did you respond? You're not letting him know you know me, right?"

"While pretending not to know you, I told him this." He took a breath. "Aki, trust in your first instincts."

"How could you tell him that!?"

"Shut up, idiot. Just get out of here. And don't you dare come back until my funeral."

"Y'know, we are childhood friends. Doesn't that normally lead to a cruel but devoted marriage?"

"Hey, wife! This old man is trying to force me to do gay things with him."

"Okay, your wife is legitimately scary, so I think that's my cue to leave."

Despite his words, Ooshiro smiled as he stepped from the light and into the darkness.

"It's nice having a conversation like this after so long. My work has been a bit too cement-like lately."

"Are you talking about my old man? Aki's been busy lately too."

"That would be classified information, but I can tell you this is something important to your father and to Akio-kun. And it will probably be important to Akio-kun 's wife as well."

After a short pause, Kashima's father nodded.

"Probably so. Aki has already decided to continue with UCAT."

"Yes. Despite everything that happened, he ended up with a nice wife. I can hear two people cooking. Which one is your wife?"

"The aged noises would be my wife. …Not that you can really tell. Since they got married, Aki's wife has come here a lot to learn how to cook." Kashima's father gave a quiet laugh. "She would tell Aki someone had left her with some extra tasks at work and then come here

every day. At first, she didn't even know how to wash rice, but that idiot Aki thinks she was an excellent cook from the get-go."

"So she's good at beneficial lies."

"How was it with you? You have a kid, right?"

"He's hopeless." Ooshiro waved a hand back and forth . "But there are certainly some interesting people other than him. I'm on my way to meet them now."

"Are they an interesting group?"

"Yes. They are terrible at lying. They can't even make the beneficial lies. …That's why I hope they can get along with the people who can."

Ooshiro turned to the east. From the high position of that yard, he could see a sea of lights beyond the mountains to the east. The gatherings of lights gradually grew denser. Starting from the west, they were Oume, Fussa, Tachikawa, and the city center.

Kashima's father followed Ooshiro's gaze.

"Susaou is somewhere in those lights, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed Ooshiro.

"And…all those lights were once lost back when we were kids."

"They were not lost."

Kashima's father looked up. He turned toward Ooshiro, but Ooshiro continued looking at the night scenery.

"If they had been lost, they could not have returned. My father, your father, the people who died among those lights in the past, and the people who survived all made sure that they were not lost."

"Are you sure that isn't just the sentimentality of an old man?"

Ooshiro turned around, formed his usual smile, and raised his right thumb.

"No, it isn't. That's why I'm on my way to meet them."

A group was advancing through the forest on the southern end of the concept space.

The group of about one hundred wore white combat outfits and were from 2nd-Gear.

Kashima was in the lead, along with Atsuta who carried the large Cowling Sword named Futsuno over his shoulder.

In his work uniform and lab coat, Kashima typed on his laptop.

"Has the scouting unit contacted us about Team Leviathan's movements?" he asked while looking at the LCD monitor.

"Team Leviathan has set up a headquarters for their supplies and sent three units out," said a voice from behind. "The main unit is in the center and normal units are on either side. Each unit has about thirty members. In other words, three of their four total units are headed toward us. That is ninety people."

"I see," said Kashima with a nod. "It looks like they are taking this seriously even if it is a mock battle. I

thought they might focus on the victory condition and send anyone who could fly directly toward Susaou."

"If they did that, I'd knock them down. Heh heh heh. I wish they'd tried."

"I really cannot understand how you think. Anyway, Atsuta…and Director Tsukuyomi."

"Yes? What is it?" Tsukuyomi stepped up next to him with a long, black leather case on her back. She was smiling. "What should we do? I expect all three of them will attack us from a distance."

"We do not need to worry about all of them. The units on the left and right are filled with normal people. We will have their central unit advance on us and attack. And then…" Kashima glanced toward the leather case on Tsukuyomi's back. "Director Tsukuyomi, please drive all four of their units, including the headquarters one, to the verge of destruction."

"Oh, my. You're heavily relying on me."

"You have the surname of 2nd-Gear's imperial family, so you have the greatest individual combat ability," said Kashima. "Mikami, Katori, you two begin exterminating

the normal units to either side once Director Tsukuyomi attacks. You've been making their weapons, so you can easily defeat them."

"Yes, sir," replied the two young men.

Kashima nodded and looked behind them. The aged managers nodded at him from further back in the unit.

Those elderly soldiers were in charge of assisting Tsukuyomi and the two inexperienced young men's attacks.

"Okay," said Kashima with a second nod. "After making a quick appearance, Atsuta and I will head for Susaou and wait there. If Team Leviathan reaches us, that's fine. If the rest of you succeed, that's fine too. I hope to receive good news."

"Do you really?"

"To receive 2nd-Gear's Concept Core and release its concepts, Yamata must be freed, calmed, and then re-sealed. I would prefer to do that after 2nd-Gear wins."

Kashima's serious expression turned toward the northwest.

Through the forest, he could glimpse the artificial lake in the center of the concept space.

The giant dark shadow that seemed to fill the night was cast by Susaou.

“The question is how much thought they’ve given this. How much do they understand concerning the name Yamata seeks, the concept space left by our ancestors, and what it means to calm Yamata.”

“If they cannot provide the name, they will be roasted on the spot.”

“If they do not understand what it means to calm Yamata, they will be roasted despite sealing Yamata like Ooshiro Hiromasa was. But if that happens, we will protect them. We will ensure they are not burned by Yamata’s flames. And we have Futsuno.”

“Yes,” said Tsukuyomi with a nod. “But why ‘they’? I thought only one person would give Yamata the answer.”

Kashima shook his head.

He was certain the boy he had spoken to in UCAT would be accompanied by the girl who had trembled when facing him.

…Just like I have someone to support me.

He had heard that those two had yet to arrive.

"It will probably be after they arrive that Team Leviathan will get serious. Do not let your guard down."

As he spoke, he heard running footsteps and a voice from ahead of him.

"The scouting unit has engaged the enemy!"

He looked forward and heard gunfire beyond the forest that sounded like cloth being struck.

"Are those named weapons? Otherwise, they would not do much."

He stopped walking as he muttered to himself.

As if in response, Atsuta, Tsukuyomi, Mikami, Katori, and the managers stopped as well.

He thought about the solid presence behind him.

…So this is my conclusion.

Or perhaps it was his beginning.

He thought he would never truly know, but he then decided he would go find that out now.

He nodded once and took in a breath.

The cold air of the forest was under the effects of 2nd-Gear's concepts.

…But it smells no different from Low-Gear's forest air.

That may have been why his parents decided to live in this Gear. But what about his grandfather?

He removed his right hand from the laptop and placed it against his chest.

The piece of Japanese paper his grandfather had written on was in the breast pocket of his work uniform.

If he faced the past atop Susaou with that in hand, he might find an answer to his questions.

He raised his right hand next to his face.

“Everyone! Japanese UCAT’s development department will now engage Team Leviathan in combat!”

As he faced forward, he lowered his hand and cried out.

“Now, awaken your surnames!!”

In a grassy plain between forests, Izumo and the others began fighting 2nd-Gear’s scouting unit.

Other than their V-Sw and G-Sp2, their comrades were using weapons meant for a mock battle. The guns used mock bullets and the swords had a cowling over the blade.

They still should have caused a decent amount of damage, but…

“It looked like the manufacturing name isn’t a very powerful name!” shouted Kazami as she swung G-Sp2.

The spear had the tip enclosed in a cowling, but it still knocked over several people in its path.

But the other members of the unit did not wield such great power. From the very first attack, they locked swords and were pushed back or their enemy charged in while ignoring their bullets.

The reason was obvious.

Concept weapons used the philosopher's stone inside to secure their own field of power. That allowed them to retain their power as a weapon under any concept. But even so…

"The bond created by the power of names is too strong ! Kaku and I are fine with V-Sw and G-sp2 because their names include the names Vajra Vritra and Gungnir, but the mass-produced weapons only have a model number for a name."

When a weapon with a name and one without clashed, the named one would win unless there was a massive difference in base strength.

"The enemy equipped themselves with that in mind."

2nd-Gear was armed exclusively with customized versions of mass-produced concept weapons.

They had decorations added and they all had a name engraved in them.

The young man currently standing in front of Kazami held a weapon named “Special Warrior’s Lightning Sword” and it was producing small-scale lightning.

However…

“Ugh, what a pain! I just have to blow him away before he can hit me!”

She ducked below the lightning attack and knocked him away.

The sensation of that strike told her that G-Sp2 maintained its strength.

And she shouted out.

“Everyone! Raise the output of your philosopher’s stones! Turn off the usage limiter for the philosopher’s stone fuel! You’ll be pushed back at the normal level!”

As she shouted, Kazami moved forward. At the moment, she and Kaku had to cut into the enemy's front line.

If they could stop the enemy for even a moment, their confused comrades could recover.

And so they went.

She glanced over at Izumo and he nodded.

"After this, the enemy's main force will attack. Hurry, Chisato."

"True. But should we really be calling them our enemy ?"

She smiled bitterly and looked forward once more.

Four members of 2nd-Gear's scouting unit had backed away and taken defensive stances.

The battlefield was a dirt ground with clumps of knee-high grass. She only needed to tread on that grass to advance.

"Kaku, you take care of the rest. I'll deal with those four."

Kazami whipped up the wind as she ran.

Starting from the closest, the enemies were to the left, left, center, and right. They were all armed with swords.

They were all prepared for her attack and they stared back at her.

They had courage.

She did not recognize them, so she was able to eliminate her hesitation.

"…!"

As she ran, she targeted the first enemy on the left.

The young man wore a white combat outfit and he attacked with the sword he drew from his right waist.

The blade moved as if to lop off her head.

But…

“Sorry.”

Kazami used the shield in her left hand to deflect the sword upwards.

With a solid sound and a light impact, the hilt left the man’s hand and the sword flew through the air.

While running with her body low to the ground, she tried to jab G-Sp2 into him.

Suddenly, the trajectory of the sword flying overhead changed.

That white line had supposedly been knocked up into the air, but it was now falling blade-down.

As she wondered what had happened, the young man gave the answer.

“We are sword gods!”

He held up his empty hand and swung it down.

“Stab into her!”

"How naïve," said Kazami.

Immediately afterwards, the butt end of G-Sp2 jabbed into the air and deflected the falling sword.

"You do not have enough real combat experience. There is more than one way to use a spear!"

She used the point of her shield to knock the young man away.

Her left arm felt a muffled scream and the sensation of something breaking.

As the young man's body floated up a bit, she slipped past him.

And then the next one came. Another attack came from the left.

The power was produced by a well-built young man. He swung a long sword like it was a bat.

It was a quick movement, but Kazami's gaze stopped on the blade.

"The blade is wrapped in water!? Please don't tell me it's called Tama-chan because it uses the water of the Tama River!"

"No. This prototype Cowling Sword uses the water of the Abukuma River! It is named Abu-san!"

"I think this goes beyond a prototype!"

The water-wrapped blade showed its power.

The water wrapped around G-Sp2 and kept it from moving.

Kazami could not use her weapon.

"…!"

That was when the third enemy approached from the front.

As his sword stabbed forward, she made an instantaneous decision.

She let go of G-Sp2.

Her next actions happened in an instant.

She used her shield to deflect the attack from the front and then rotated her body clockwise.

She launched a roundhouse kick into the back of the young man swinging the water sword.

Her right backhand slammed into the enemy arriving from the front.

Two sounds of impact rang out.

The water sword and G-Sp2 flew through the air.

While continuing to rotate, Kazami caught G-Sp2.

“Do not abandon me,” complained the spear.

“Sorry.”

With a bitter smile, Kazami faced forward and swung the spear.

The horizontal attack eliminated the last enemy coming from the right.

She looked over and saw Izumo had knocked the other enemies away and ended the battle.

She let out a breath, but then she gulped.

At some point, countless white figures had appeared on the vast nighttime plain.

“That’s…”

At least one hundred white figures stood approximately one hundred meters away on the grass.

“2nd-Gear’s main unit!?”

That was precisely who this was.

2nd-Gear’s main force was lined up. In the center, Kazami saw Kashima, Atsuta, and Tsukuyomi.

One of the three stepped forward.

It was Atsuta.

He held the largest Cowling Sword Kazami had ever seen.

Its length alone was greater than Izumo's V-Sw.

And he sang as he approached.

"The tuuuunaaaa of the seeeaaaaa are freshwaterrrrr fisssshhhh!!"

His song brought looks of displeasure to the faces of the adults around him, but he did not care.

He held up the sword's hilt like a microphone.

"The suuuuun sets over the Pacifiiiiiic!"

Once he finished the chorus, he looked toward Kazami with a satisfied expression.

A joyful smile appeared on the corner of his mouth.

"Heh. My special performance sure attracted a lot of customers. Tonight's a good night. Now, how about another song?"

"Stop, Atsuta. You are being rude."

"Kashima, are you betraying me?"

"I do not know how this is playing out in your head, but I will gladly bear the title of traitor if it will stop your singing."

"Is that so?" Atsuta sighed and lightly swung the Cowling Sword up in one hand. "Fine then. We can start off tonight with a single attack from the ultimate weapon me and my jolly friends created. This is the Cowling Sword Futsuno."

The Cowling Sword slowly cut through the wind and stabbed into the earth.

In the next moment, a 200 meter square area of earth burst apart.

Kazami watched the destruction of the crust.

Before her eyes, the ground broke and peeled up. And it did not stop.

The power of the slice created a canyon as it raced toward her.

"…!?"

She was surrounded by the wind and noise that preceded the destruction.

And riding on that momentum, the slicing attack arrived.

Just before Kazami thought she was done for, a shadow stood in front of her.

The shadow produced a voice.

“Aaaaahhhhh!”

The shout and sound of impact produced an immediate result.

The center of the slicing power was broken.

“!”

It raced past on either side.

The roar and destruction of the earth continued on behind her and the wind pursued it.

But that was all.

Once the wind died down, silence fell and Kazami looked at the shadow before her.

"Kaku."

"That's right."

Izumo's back was rising and falling as he gasped for breath. V-Sw's cowling had been driven into the ground and the console on the hilt displayed a single word.

"Ow."

Kazami smiled bitterly at that and looked around once more. The destruction of the ground around them was different from that behind them. Starting with where V-Sw had been driven into the ground, a fan-shaped area was much more lightly damaged.

…V-Sw's destructive power interfered with that breaking power.

But Izumo did not look her way. He faced forward.

She did the same and saw the white army had not moved from their position behind the destruction.

And Izumo called out to them.

"Is that a Cowling Sword created with all the focus placed on cutting?"

Atsuta looked up as he rested the Cowling Sword on his shoulder.

"That's right. Futsuno would be known as Futsu-no-mitama in this world. If you take Futsu to mean 'cut', it means 'the cutting soul'."

Meaning…

"In this space ruled by names, Futsuno can cut through anything. Even light and darkness."

Atsuta picked a stone up from the ground and threw it into the air.

Once it reached a few meters up, gravity began to pull it down.

It was going to hit Atsuta.

Just as it started to fall, he swung Futsuno above his head and through empty air.

The blade did not actually hit the small stone.

But once the stone fell through the path Futsuno had taken, it moved to the right and avoided Atsuta.

"The stone…moved out of the way?"

Atsuta explained it to Izumo.

"Do you get it? I cut misfortune. Swords used to be used as good luck charms because they could cut through misfortune. Do you understand? No attack can reach Futsuno and no defense works against it. If the blade can reach something, it can cut it. You need to keep that in mind, you little brats."

With that said, Atsuta moved back.

At the same time, 2nd-Gear began to move. The vanguard moved forward and a few members of the rear guard did something else.

…They're flying.

A few people in white combat outfits walked up into the air and into the sky as if climbing a staircase.

Kazami spotted guns or bows in their hands.

She made a single decision: she could not let them fly. That was all.

"…"

So she took in a breath and bent forward.

If she did not oppose them with the X-Wi on her back, they would achieve air superiority.

She imagined power gathering in her shoulder blades.

X-Wi reacted to her will and the movements of her muscles.

It produced light.

White light overflowed from the two spheres at the top of X-Wi which formed the bases of the wings.

"!"

She then looked forward and froze in shock.

There was a simple reason for this.

She had seen a flash of light.

A giant flash of light shot toward her from the front.

She almost mistook it for the dragon's main canon she had seen in their battle against 1st-Gear.

"Wh-…"

She tried to ask what it was.

"Get down, you idiot!"

But Izumo's voice and hands pressed her to the ground.

The next thing she knew, an overwhelming force passed by overhead and swallowed up the light growing from her back.

That force was a white light.

It was a large beam of light with actual mass and a radius of over three meters.

The sound of the racing light was a roar in the air. The scent could only be described as white. And the impact…

"…!"

The sound of earth scattering behind her eloquently described its power.

When she turned around, she saw a wide gouge in the ground and her comrades scattered everywhere.

All of those who had collapsed were unconscious and not moving.

"Now you've done it…"

Kazami looked forward.

She clearly saw one figure standing in the center of 2nd-Gear's troops.

It was Tsukuyomi.

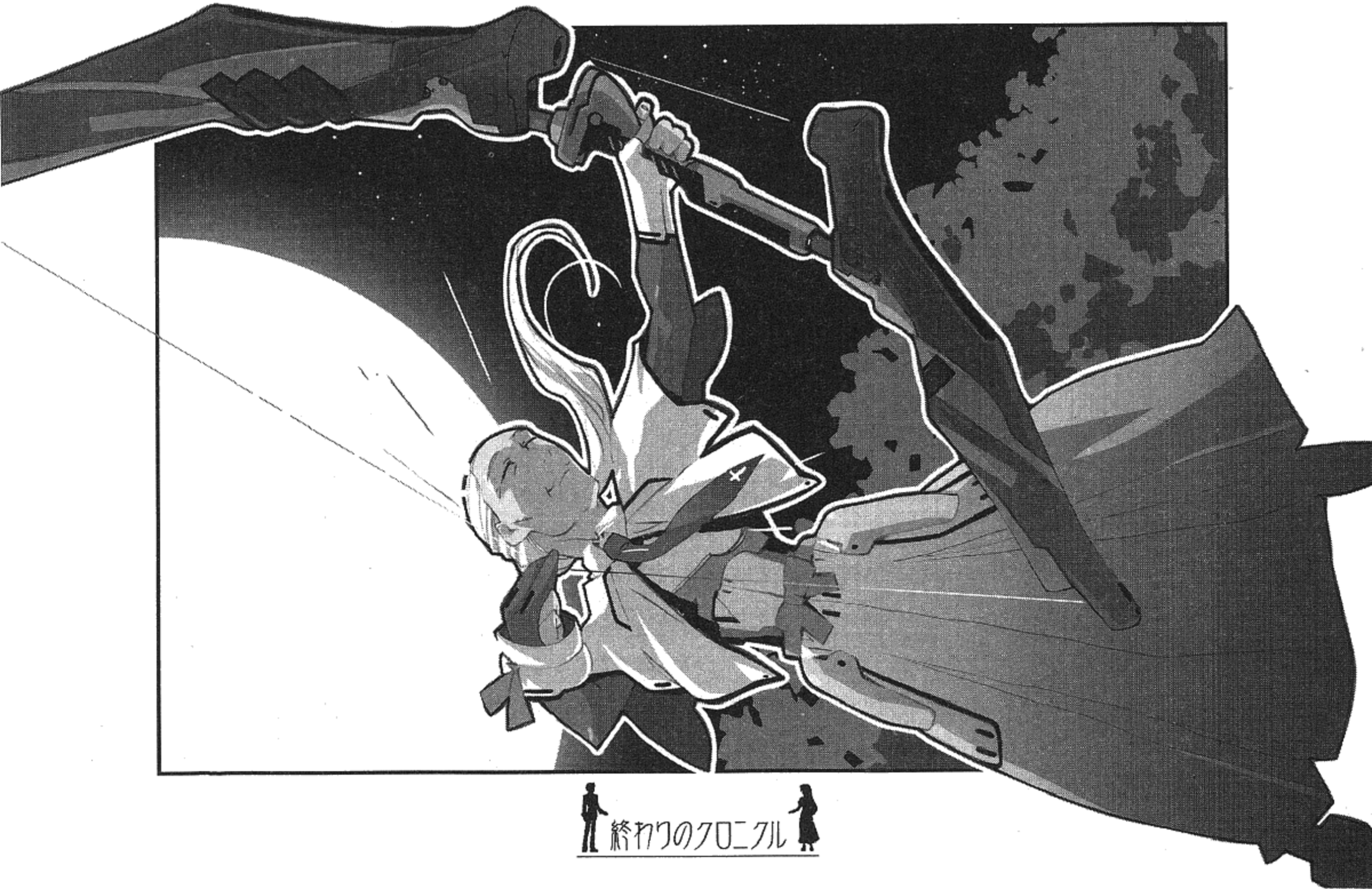
She stood one hundred meters away and wore a white and black armored uniform.

The elderly woman wore a white cape over her shoulders which fluttered in the wind.

She held her arms toward Kazami and those arms held a certain object.

It was a giant black bow encased in a cowling.

The bow was over two meters long and it formed a powerful arc with no arrow in it.



終わりのクロニクル

Tsukuyomi held the large bow.

She needed to draw Team Leviathan's attention to herself.

After all, Atsuta had fallen back so he and Kashima could head for Susaou. If Team Leviathan noticed them …

…They would at least grow impatient.

That was fine with her.

"But we need you to oppose us properly first."

As she spoke, she saw a boy and a girl standing on the destroyed plain.

They were the Izumo family's heir and his partner. Their weapons were the Cowling Sword V-Sw and the Cowling Spear G-Sp2.

Her team had created both weapons.

And based on the data retrieved after each battle of theirs, neither of them was fully using their weapon.

…They have both used the second form only a few times and have not used the third form since the first time they used the weapons.

G-Sp had not shown its third form since being remodeled into 2.

That simply meant they had not met an enemy powerful enough.

…But they might not be using the normal forms to their fullest either.

Their weapons had wills of their own.

Their names were engraved on the cowling and they had fabricated memories in order to establish their wills.

That had been after sealing Futsuno. After learning their lesson from Futsuno, they had spent several years attempting to create cowlings that would suppress the weapon's own power.

How fully were they using these weapons with wills of their own? How much did they trust them?

"Perhaps I should test that here."

A smile naturally formed on her face and she drew the bowstring with the smile still there.

She thought on how long it had been since she had last drawn this bow.

"This weapon was created for the Concept War and it has been passed down in the 2nd-Gear imperial family of Tsukuyomi. It is known as the Heavenly Moon Bow and my husband left it behind."

"And that was its power you just showed us? That'd probably blow through a mechanical dragon, but…"

"Oh, dear. The boring explanations are my job. Please do not interrupt."

Tsukuyomi laughed. It was a small laugh that could be called a snicker.

"Son of Izumo, I was merely tuning the bow just now. Think about the name I just mentioned."

"Heavenly moon…" muttered the girl next to him.

"Yes. How about I tell you where the light technology used for your wings came from?"

Tsukuyomi looked up into the sky.

She looked up into the heavens were a round pale light floated directly overhead.

Tsukuyomi felt it was a wonderful and pleasant light.

…I spend so much time underground. I need to take some time to bathe in the moonlight more often.

She then faced forward and looked at the two enemies standing up front.

"I have been drawing this bowstring for a while now."

"Are you saying you've been targeting us this whole time?"

"No."

Tsukuyomi smiled and pointed the bow toward the sky.

As she held the large arc up toward the moon directly above, she spoke.

“I have been gathering strength.”

She released the string and a sound resembling a koto rang loudly through the air.

The wind carried the note high into the sky.

“Resound, musical bow of moonlight! Clear away the misfortune we could not make use of during the Concept War!”

The wind blew strongly through the sky and all sound vanished.

In the next moment, countless small lights appeared across the night sky.

That group of lights twinkled like the stars as they appeared on the concept space ceiling approximately two kilometers above.

The specks of light numbered at least in the hundreds.

And they all fell at once.

The lights were not meteors or comets. They were giant pillars of light falling vertically down.

Each one was at least five meters across and the hundreds of pillars were packed thickly together.

They fell.

“Strike, attack of moonlight!”

As Tsukuyomi shouted out, the hundreds of lights ripped apart the ground.

At the same time, 2nd-Gear’s full force moved forward to begin their own individual battles.

As dust and wind burst upwards, a great noise and a tremor caused the ground to crumble beneath their feet.

The pillars of moonlight poured down one after another and they showed no sign of stopping.

Amid it all, Kazami and Izumo ran.

They ran back in order to move away from their enemy.

“Fall back!”

It was unclear if their comrades could hear them.

They could see the hammer of light also striking the normal units to the left and right.

As Izumo ran alongside Kazami, he would occasionally swing V-Sw overhead to slice apart a pillar of light falling toward them.

They ran.

They moved toward a location the moonlight could not reach.

And there was only one such place.

“The forest!”

They ran to the forest along the southern edge of the concept space. This was the forest they had walked through to arrive here.

The moonlight avoided the forest as it fell. It was possible the shadows would weaken it.

…Our headquarters are beyond that forest. I hope they're okay.

But Kazami could not focus on that now. The danger before her eyes took precedence.

The moonlight was avoiding the forest, but that would essentially trap them there.

She did not like it, but that was their only option until they could regroup.

They ran.

The forest was approximately one hundred meters away and she did not know if everyone could last that long.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see several other people running just like Izumo and her, but a pillar would occasionally hit them. They would then fly through the air and land sprawled out on the ground.

"That almost looks fun," said Izumo.

"If you say you want to try it, I'll throw you to the ground!" she shouted back while still running.

Their comrades who had reached the forest ahead of them were shouting their way.

At first, she thought they were telling her to hurry.

But then she realized they were pointing behind her.

"Kazami! Behind you! Behind you!"

She turned around and saw that Tsukuyomi had fired another horizontal shot. Also, some 2nd-Gear youths were pursuing her with swords in hand. About a dozen of them were spread out in a horizontal line.

"Die!!"

"I thought this was a mock battle!!"

As she cried out, the light arrived. Izumo turned around, but he was not going to make it in time.

However, a shadow dashed in the light's path.

No, two shadows.

Kazami recognized the two people and she spoke a name.

“Sayama!?”

The one shadow nodded and spoke the other name.

“Shinjou-kun is here as well.”

As he spoke, Sayama pulled something from the back of his waist.

It was a Japanese sword with a short, thick blade.

“The old man gave me this sword just now. How will a sword with a name from Low-Gear handle the moonlight!?”

He held the sword backhanded and jabbed the blade forward.

The horizontal beam of moonlight and the trajectory of Sayama’s steel crossed.

“!”

This produced a sound similar to a steel wind instrument being struck.

The light was deflected before Sayama's eyes.

The white moonlight produced spray like a waterfall and scattered.

Sayama pulled back the sword which had split the moonlight and inspected its blade.

It had not chipped, but he had felt a distinct impact in his hand. If he repeated the action, the blade would grow more and more bent until it was unusable.

…I cannot do this much.

Kazami then asked a question as she ran.

"Where have you been!?"

"I will explain later. For now, let me say that our headquarters has been destroyed."

Kazami frowned and Izumo gave an exasperated sigh.

While those two fell silent, Shinjou elbowed him in the side.

“You’ll explain later? Should I really tell them my identity?”

“Yes, that should eliminate your reservations. And to help persuade them, perhaps I should be the one to tell them.”

“Eh?”

“Kazami, listen carefully as you run. Earlier in my dorm room, I spread Shinjou-kun’s legs to check on-…”

“Waaah!!”

Shinjou let out a yell to drown out his voice.

She yelled even louder than the sounds of the falling moonlight, so Kazami looked puzzled.

Meanwhile, Shinjou frantically waved her hands.

"I-It's nothing. Nothing at all. Sayama-kun is just a little crazy."

"R-really? Well, there's no helping it with Sayama, but make sure you don't catch his insanity, Shinjou."

"Lately, it has become apparent that the people around me have a twisted picture of me…"

Kazami and Izumo ignored Sayama as they charged ahead into the forest.

But the enemy was still pursuing them.

Shinjou turned toward Sayama and nodded. Strength gathered in her slender shoulders.

"We need to make up for being so late."

He took a step back as he watched the young men of 2nd-Gear approach with their swords.

Meanwhile, Shinjou also took a step back and spun her Cowling Staff vertically in her right hand.

The two meter white Cowling Staff was named Ex-St.

She rested the bend in the center of the body on her shoulder and she grasped the staff like a gun barrel.

And Ex-St began to change form.

First, six button-style triggers appeared on the right side of the surface.

Next, a grip stuck out on the front left.

Shinjou used that grip to support the staff and hold it in place. She then looked at Ex-St's gun portion.

The equipment's designated name was written on side of the white cowling. This was the second name given to Ex-St.

"Tiger Star."

As Shinjou muttered that name, the moonlight fell. But she paid it no heed.

She held up the staff and stared at the enemy.

One of them shouted to his comrades.

"Don't worry! Ex-St has never produced much power! "

"True. My determination is a bit too weak," muttered Shinjou. "But that doesn't mean I haven't thought of a way to fight like that!"

How could one strengthen a weak attack?

There was a single answer. She raised her five fingers over the six button-style triggers on the outer surface.

"Rapid fire!!"

She snapped her wrist to the left and right while bringing her fingers back and forth over the trigger buttons.

Each time she hit the buttons, a white bullet flew out.

She fired again and again.

The clicking of the buttons rang out almost like a musical instrument.

As she surpassed sixty shots a second, Sayama let out a gasp of wonder.

"Shinjou-kun, where did you learn that underhanded technique!?"

"In UCAT's game café! I don't want to break my nails, so I can't keep it up for long, though."

As hit piled up on top of hit, the enemy was swallowed up.

And then it all exploded.

A chain reaction of explosions created a giant wall of light which jutted up into the heavens.

A wall of light rose into the sky. It was 100 meters long and at least 40 meters tall.

It rose up like a pillar of water and it collapsed at the peak.

That light was visible from within the forest.

Four people watched it.

They were away from the battlefield in the eastern forest.

There was a small clearing there.

As they watched the light scatter into the air, a female voice spoke up.

“Fireworks!”

“Tatsumi, those are not fireworks,” said Mikoku. She wore a black shirt and sipped from a paper cup. “ Fireworks happen during the summer.”

“Mikoku, I don’t think the season is the problem,” said Shino in a white shirt. She held chopsticks. “In fact, I think what we’re doing here is the problem.”

In front of her were a wooden table, a portable stove, a steel plate, meat, and vegetables. Beyond it all were Hajji in a black shirt and Tatsumi in an orange T-shirt and white vest.

Hajji poured himself a beer and took a drink.

"Well, there's nothing for us to do this time. Their security here has actually dropped due to the mock battle , so what's wrong with sneaking into the concept space and watching the transition? Hm? What is it, Shino? Your meat is cooked."

"Oh, right."

After taking the meat on a paper plate with sauce on it, Shino tilted her head.

Was this really a reconnaissance mission?

She had her doubts, but the food would taste good all the same.

Next to her, Mikoku was still looking beyond the forest. The older girl finally opened her mouth to speak.

"That falling moonlight was amazing. Father, couldn't we have invited 2nd-Gear to join us purely as a fighting force rather than for their development abili- That is my meat!!"

"You must not let your guard down, Mikoku. I am a philanthropist when it comes to everything but pork. Hm ?"

I see, thought Shino. *This is the same as always.*

And so she grabbed a carrot.

"Did you make this sauce, Tatsumi?"

"Yes. I asked Alex for his family's recipe before. I removed some of the garlic, though."

"Is that so?" muttered Shino.

"Maybe we should have brought Alex with us," said Hajji as he looked up into the sky. "This place is plenty dark and spacious."

"He can't," explained Tatsumi. "While his body is being messed with, he says merely touching the outside air makes him feel like his body is going to collapse. … He'll probably be like that for another two months. Also, he can't eat."

"…"

"C'mon, don't get so down. You eat too, Mikoku. No matter what we say, it won't change anything with him. He's working hard to be modified into the Army's greatest power, so we shouldn't complain."

Tatsumi threw some cooked meat onto Mikoku's plate.

And Mikoku frowned.

"It feels inadequate without rice."

Suddenly, something that shined in the light appeared right in front of Mikoku's face.

Shino realized it was the tip of a blade.

Tatsumi was holding it.

At some point, she had swapped out the chopsticks in her right hand for a sword.

The tip of the white sword and a perfectly honest smile were pointed in Mikoku's direction.

"I apologize for forgetting that. Would you like this instead?"

Mikoku's shoulders drooped and she started picking up the meat and vegetables.

Shino smiled bitterly toward her.

"Not even you can stand up to Tatsumi, Mikoku."

"Who can stand up to a female weapon who can oppose a Cowling Sword with a wooden sword? She even has Alex under her control. You could say she effectively controls all of the Army's offensive power."

"I'd appreciate if you at least said you were determined to defeat me eventually. …Plus, you rely on strength too much, Mikoku."

The woman whose long hair had the sides brushed back smiled. It was the smile of a teacher watching over her student.

At some point, she had switched back to holding her chopsticks.

When Shino noticed that, she commented on it.

"Tatsumi, you're naturally amazing, aren't you?"

"Thank you. My master trained me well. In the few years since I came to Low-Gear, I've run through the mountains, swam through the rivers, and otherwise nurtured my intuition in the open world rather than in a dojo."

"So no one can stand up to you. …I didn't realize you had brought back your wild side in this modern age."

"I don't know if you can call me wild or not, but I wouldn't exactly say no one can stand up to me."

Tatsumi used her chopsticks to pick up an onion just before it burned. She then placed it on her plate.

"I still don't think I can stand up to my master and others have caught up to me. For example, you have, Mikoku. Also, there's my master's grandchild and the child who treated me like an older sister for a bit. I wonder what they're doing now." Tatsumi sighed and bit into an onion. "Oh, it's sweet. Mikoku, stop eating only the meat and try some vegetables too. I secretly bought only well-known and expensive brands."

"You secretly bought them?"

"Yes. I managed to get money out of maintenance and general affairs by saying we were having a secret meeting with 2nd-Gear."

"So if I tell them negotiations with 2nd-Gear fell through, everything will be fine? Hm?" said Hajji.

"Y-you can't do that!" shouted Shino. "You shouldn't lie! Mikoku, you can't eat this meat!"

As Shino shouted, Mikoku used her chopsticks to stick some meat in Shino's opened mouth.

Shino chewed and swallowed without thinking.

"Now you are our partner in crime. Hm?"

"Mikoku, if you're going to do an impression of me, you need to give a little more…well, you know. Hm?"

Mikoku ignored Hajji's comment and asked him a question.

"Father, Susaou is in the center of the lake beyond the forest and 2nd-Gear's concept core is sealed inside Totsuka on its bridge."

"And you are wondering why we aren't going to get it ? That's right, isn't it? Isn't it?"

As Mikoku glared silently at him with half-lidded eyes , Hajji continued speaking.

"That is because of Yamata's question."

"Yamata's…question?"

"Yes. Yamata will only give in to one it approves of. And that is why answering Yamata's question is a gamble. If you fail, you die, but success isn't a sure thing either. Someone who gave the correct answer in the past was still burned away by Yamata's distinctive flames. … If Team Leviathan can both provide the correct answer and live on, we can watch how they do it from here."

Hajji suddenly turned toward Shino.

"Am I talking too much? Well? Hm?"

"I think it's a good thing on occasion." She then looked beyond the forest. "But Team Leviathan has it tough. They're working so hard to collect the Concept Cores while not knowing what we will eventually do."

"Well, we should probably make an appearance before too long. The Gears we are currently negotiating with and the ones we cannot negotiate with do not know what the others are doing, but their actions are meshing together well as far as I can tell."

He hid his mouth behind his hand.

“Perhaps next time. Hm?”

Chapter 27: Your Name

Chapter 27

“Your Name”

What is good and what is bad?
The answer only lies within yourself
Give that fear the name of expectation

What is good and what is bad?

The answer only lies within yourself

Give that fear the name of expectation

Those who had escaped unharmed gathered in a small forest clearing.

Including Team Leviathan, a total of approximately fifty people had gathered.

Through the forest, the people of 2nd-Gear were visible in the field which had been destroyed by moonlight.

But they showed no sign of moving.

Both sides needed some time to regroup before they could attack or fight back.

And Shinjou spoke in front of those who sat in the clearing.

With Sayama next to her, she lowered the ends of her eyebrows and brought her hands to her chest.

"That's the truth. That's the kind of body I have."

So…

"I'm sorry for not telling all of you."

Sayama watched as she lowered her head.

She is very diligent, he thought.

That diligence would sometimes be a negative thing for her.

…But what about now?

Shinjou slowly raised her head.

Her slender body was examining the group. Most of those looking at her merely looked confused.

…That is not surprising.

Shinjou had made this sudden confession on the battlefield.

They would not truly understand what she meant until later.

And amid those confused looks, someone stood up.

“I don’t fully understand, but excuse me a moment.”

It was Kazami.

She pushed G-Sp2 and its shield toward Izumo and walked over.

Her expression was calm and she said nothing. In exactly ten steps, she arrived in front of Shinjou.

There, she sighed and lowered her shoulders a bit.

“Sayama, support her.”

Her words were accompanied by a high-pitched noise from Shinjou’s cheek.

Sayama supported Shinjou as she trembled a bit.

In the follow-through pose of a right-handed slap, Kazami spoke.

"That should settle that. But let me give you a piece of advice. If you apologize for something like that again, I'll slap you again. That's all there is to it."

"…Are you sure that's all?"

Shinjou's probing question produced a sigh from Kazami.

"Y'know, our job here isn't to reveal everything about ourselves. It's up to you whether you tell us something or not. And the responsibility that brings is yours, Shinjou."

Shinjou did not nod or shake her head. Instead, she thought.

As Sayama supported her back, he realized Kazami had glanced over at him.

"I of course do not have a problem with Shinjou-kun keeping silent about this."

"See? I don't remember ever finding it to be a problem either. …And if the idiot who's always with you took no damage from it, do you even need to ask those who are more distance with you?" Kazami turned back toward

Shinjou. “But you can’t just apologize. You apologize when you have done something wrong. And if you apologize when you haven’t done anything wrong, it means that your very existence is wrong. You told us this because you didn’t want that to happen, right?”

“R-right.”

“Then that’s fine. Sorry for slapping you. I held back, so please forgive me.”

“Sure.”

Shinjou gave a large nod and something red dripped from her nose to her mouth.

“W-wah! S-Sayama-kun! Give me a handkerchief or something!”

“Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun, you look beautiful even with a nosebleed.”

“Th-this is not the time for that! Give me something to wipe up the blood.”

“Wait just a moment. …Kazami, what happened to your restraint?”

Everyone turned criticizing looks in Kazami's direction.

"Eh? Eh?" said Kazami as all those cold eyes turned toward her. "Th-that was only 1/10 of what I always use on Kaku."

"I'm always receiving ten times that?"

"Come now, you two. This is no time for a lovey-dovey couple's conversation."

"There's nothing lovey-dovey about her violence!!"

Everyone ignored Izumo's opinion.

Sayama pulled Baku and a handkerchief from his breast pocket.

He placed Baku on his head, used the handkerchief to wipe the area below Shinjou's nose and around her mouth, and found the bleeding had already lessened.

Her expression seemed to say "is it okay?", so he nodded. Kazami gave a sigh of relief before speaking again.

"By the way, why were you two so late?"

"Well, Shinjou-kun wanted to convince me of her body 's value, so she got on the bed and showed me-…"

"Waaaah!!" shouted Shinjou while grabbing his collar.

Either because they had been unable to hear Sayama's words or because of Shinjou's strange shout, Kazami and the others stopped moving and turned confused looks toward them.

Kazami tilted her head and spoke as a representative for them all.

"What? I didn't catch that. She wanted to convince you of her value, so…what?"

Sayama looked at Kazami and everyone else over Shinjou's head and nodded.

"So I spread her-…"

"You can't tell them that!!"

As soon as he started speaking, Shinjou shook him by his collar.

As his vision shook, he had a certain thought.

…I see. So this is what it means to be lovey-dovey. Heh heh. I have never experienced anything like it. Flirting like your average person is…

"Wonderful…"

Bring on the lovey-dovey. Shake me even harder, he thought just before his necktie tightened.

"W-wait, Shinjou-kun. If you keep this up, my nirvana meter will enter the red zone!"

"I'll stop those words at the source!"

Sayama tried to stop her, but Shinjou was showing no restraint this night.

Kazami nodded as she saw the look of anger on Shinjou's face and their struggle over their arms and the collar.

"I see. So you're in that kind of relationship."

"K-Kazami-san, please don't make strange, indecent assumptions!"

"Sayama, do this properly, okay? She isn't used to it."

"Do not worry. I am always gentle with Shinjou-kun. I treat everyone else equally, though."

"S-stop making misunderstandings over my head! And Kazami-san! Why did your indecent conclusion lead you back to your original position!?"

"That's right," said another voice. Sayama glanced over and saw Ooki. "As your teacher, I cannot allow an impure relationship with the opposite sex!"

"Calm down, Ooki-sensei. Shinjou-kun is both sexes. As both a boy and a girl, the impurity cancels itself out."

"Oh. Um… Is that how it works?"

"Someone tell her," whispered the rest of the group, but she did not seem to hear them.

"B-but I'm relieved," she said with a smile. "I realized Setsu-kun was Sadame-san from the moment he arrived. "

After a one second pause, everyone shouted out in unison.

"You're kidding!!"

"I-I am not kidding. Any normal person would have figured it out."

"Even if a normal person would have, I still have my doubts that you would."

Hearing everyone's comment, Ooki proudly puffed out her chest.

"Heh hehn. But I did figure it out. And I never thought Shinjou-kun – or would it be Shinjou-san? – was causing any trouble. I even sympathized. I have to hide my ears at school, but I would tell people if I could. I have to think about the age we live in and the world we live in, but I have my own personal feelings as well. And what matters is getting those two things to mesh."

Sayama felt Shinjou relax in his arms.

"But," said Ooki while obviously feeling satisfied with her previous words. "Coming out and getting rid of

those worries is a good thing. For example, Kazami-san has shown her violent tendencies to everyone and-Hyaaaah! That was fast!”

A few hands reached up from behind Ooki and dragged her into the group of sitting people.

Sayama ignored the screams in the background and released Shinjou from his arms.

After she moved a bit away, she turned a troubled look in his direction.

“Was this really the right thing to do?”

“You can ask that again once we have seen the full result. The process is not over yet.”

“You’re right.”

Shinjou nodded and remade her expression.

That was when they heard a voice from the south where the main unit had been.

Sayama looked over and saw Yonkichi running over with someone following him. He wore a flight jacket and waved his hand.

"W-we're in trouble, pi! The headquarters really were destroyed by the moonlight, pi! …Gwoohhh!!"

Yonkichi flew to the side for some reason. Soon thereafter, an old man in a lab coat, Mitsuaki, ran up.

"I apologize for our foolish younger brother's out-of-place 'pi' gag! H-his older brothers will severely punish him later."

"That fascinating introduction is nice, but please get to the point."

Mitsuaki ran over to Sayama and slowed his pace.

"All of our supplies have been lost. In other words, we must fight the battle with only the personnel and equipment we have here!"

Everyone stood up and looked over their equipment.

They recalled what they had done as the moonlight fell and during the fighting just before that.

"We released the limiters on our concept weapons," muttered Kazami. "We're almost out of philosopher's stone fuel."

"That's right, Chisato. The enemy got us good."

Izumo's complaint was followed by the remaining members of the headquarters arriving behind Mitsuaki.

The people looked like bluish black shadows.

They included Ooshiru Itaru with his metal cane, Sf, Diana, and…

"Brunhild Schild is accompanying me as a special inspector from 1st-Gear," explained Diana.

A girl in black clothes and a three-cornered hat had a bird on her shoulder and a cat at her feet.

"You are the ones who spoke with the dragon of 1st-Gear, so what kind of battle will you show us here?" asked Brunhild. "We can't exactly have you lose here. I

never thought I would be attacked in your headquarters while drinking tea. I spilled my tea."

"I see you are hoping for a tea-filled battle. That is quite appropriate for such a historic fight."

Sayama then saw someone behind Brunhild and the others.

"Old man."

"The star player has arrived."

Ooshiro wore his usual lab coat and he held both a metal case and something long and narrow wrapped in paper. He raised his right thumb as he approached.

"I've brought Georgius and what you asked me for, Mikoto-kun. But it looks like you are having some troubles." He smiled bitterly. "What happened?"

Atsuta's voice reverberated across the still lake surface.

"There's nothing Team Leviathan can do now."

He was in the center of the concept space. Specifically, he stood on the southern shore of the artificial lake where Sayama and Tsukuyomi had held the preliminary negotiations.

The thirty meter square area was created by a clearing in the forest and it was covered in weeds.

“Team Leviathan has stopped moving,” said Kashima who was there with Atsuta. “That shows that the moonlight bombing hit their headquarters as planned.”

“Weren’t the inspectors there? Won’t that give them a bad impression of us?”

“Isn’t that what you would want, Atsuta?”

“That’s for sure.”

Atsuta smiled bitterly and Kashima looked toward the lake.

A floating pier made from rotting wood stretched out over the lake surface.

It continued to the center of the lake where a giant mass of metal stood.

"It's so big…"

The moon provided the backlight for a five hundred meter iron giant.

That was Susaou.

Its arms were made quite long to help it balance while walking and those arms were held out into empty air as if carrying something.

The remains of the bridge sank into the chest and the convection of the wind wrapped thin clouds around them.

Kashima stared up at Susaou.

…I've come here again.

But would the others make it?

Atsuta asked that question while casually swinging around Futsuno.

"Heh heh I wonder if they'll make it here. I actually have a legitimate reason to punch that guy. You just can't have a kid accepted by a grown woman. It doesn't work that way."

"I have no idea what you are talking about, but it sounds like a personal grudge."

"Yeah, but what's wrong with that? You need some kind of justification for fighting. This means I don't have to worry when I punch him. …I think I'll sing a song once I win."

"Sorry, but I think you should probably lose."

"What are you talking about?"

Atsuta spun Futsuno horizontally over his head.

Darkness suddenly fell over everything below the path Futsuno had taken.

It was a bluish darkness.

There was only one possible explanation.

Futsuno had cut the moonlight.

As Atsuta stopped swinging Futsuno around, the darkness thinned and finally vanished.

He then held Futsuno up and looked into the sky.

“I wonder how much that Sayama guy can do.”

“Are you listening? I will now give you the basic method for defeating 2nd-Gear.”

Sayama held up two handguns. As the guns hung down from his right hand like fruit, everyone formed a semicircle and watched.

He showed them the two guns.

“I had these handguns delivered to me on a certain condition. They are both nothing more than standard models from American UCAT. You can see that, right?”

Everyone silently nodded.

"And my sword has a name. Needless to say, that name comes from someone's surname."

Some people in the crowd raised her hand.

It was Kazami who stood with Izumo, Sibyl, and the others.

"But your sword cut the moonlight, didn't it?" she asked. "Why? Even with sword names like Muramasa or Masamune, they're still just Low-Gear names, right?"

"An excellent question. I will now show you what this means."

Sayama tossed the two handguns into the air.

And…

"…!"

With a backhanded grip, he drew the sword hanging on the back of his waist.

And in the same motion, he swung it.

Two sounds rang out an instant later and three objects fell to the ground.

He looked down at his feet.

“The handgun the sword struck first deflected the blade, but the other one…”

He picked up the destroyed handgun which was now nothing more than a piece of metal sliced in half. The cut was sharp and it almost looked like a sliced vegetable.

But when he picked up the other one, it was unscathed .

“Now, does anyone know the difference between these two handguns?”

Everyone fell silent for a few seconds.

As they exchanged glances, a hand rose on the left side of the group.

It was Boldman. He pointed at Sayama and the handguns he held.

"Sayama…or should I call you commander? Anyway, let me see the side of the unharmed handgun."

Sayama held up the left handgun.

The moonlight descending through the trees illuminated the side. This revealed something there.

When he saw it, Boldman let out a quick laugh.

"Whose gun is this?"

His answer came from right next to him.

A gray-haired elderly soldier from the standard division raised his hand. Boldman immediately looked over.

"What exactly is this carved into the side?"

"Chris. It's my daughter's name. She is always watching over me from heaven."

As everyone gulped a bit, Sayama nodded.

"I apologize for treating your daughter so roughly. But does everyone understand now? That is what it means for names to hold power."

Kazami tilted her head.

"So is power given by nicknames as well as the name you're born with?"

"Correct. The question is how that name is perceived. If you think about it, it is obvious. For example, 2nd-Gear 's sword god is named Atsuta. The name Atsuta has nothing to do with swords, but they all perceive it as the name of a sword god."

"Does that mean names have…?"

"Yes, names have two meanings: the literal meaning of the characters and the perception people have of the name itself. And in this concept space both of those meanings provide power."

Sayama indicated the sword at his waist and the handgun in his hand.

"This sword was intended to defeat evil, so it was given a name that symbolizes an evil-defeating sword. And this gun was given the name of a woman who cares for her father, so it provides protection for that father. Names are a reflection of people's feelings. A name many people care for will provide power for many people and a name an individual cares for will provide power to that individual."

Sayama turned toward the elderly soldier.

"Your daughter is indeed watching over you."

The old man nodded and Sayama nodded back before returning the handgun.

"Those of you with attachment to your weapons should trust in them. I also had the old man bring five more swords just like the one I have. Those who specialize in close-quarters combat should take them."

"Oh, but, Sayama-kun? What are we supposed to do if we have no skills or weapons like that?" asked Ooki.

"I will explain that now."

He beckoned Boldman over.

The crowd parted to allow the large man through and Sayama gestured for him to sit in front of him.

“The enemy will use the power of their names to advance on us. Tsukuyomi and her control over the moon is their cornerstone. She is their shrine maiden who can use the power of the moon and she will use that power to aid her allies.”

Sayama saw Boldman sit.

“We will use a similar method. We have a certain Greek goddess.”

“Cybele. Read it just a little different and it becomes Sibyl.” With a smile, Sibyl spoke from next to Kazami. “ Sayama-sama, are you asking me to play the role of goddess in order to oppose Director Tsukuyomi?”

“Yes. And Sibyl-kun? You will also help with our equipment. If anyone has a nickname for their weapon, act as our shrine maiden and carve that name into it. And for the weapons that do not have a nickname, carve your own name to provide a goddess’s protection.”

A buzz ran through the young male personnel when they heard that.

“We can get Sibyl-san’s signature.”

“This is great. Just great. While we’re at it, I want her to sign my back too.”

“Now I want to avoid using my weapon as much as possible.”

The men excitedly lined up in front of Sibyl.

Ooshiro stood at the end of the line.

“Okay, this is the end of the line. Only one per person. Cutting in line gets you sent to the back.”

As Sayama watched the people lining up, Boldman looked up at him from the ground.

“So why am I sitting here?”

“Oh, my apologies. I forgot to explain that. Anyway, I will start with the most important information.”

He took a breath.

"We are currently surrounded."

Everyone gasped and looked around.

The enemy was there.

At some point, some figures had appeared inside and outside the forest. They formed a wide circle around the group.

This was a different unit from those on the grassy field with Tsukuyomi.

The groups attacking the left and right units had continued on and slowly surrounded them.

"It would seem the enemy has completed their preparations. I am hoping we can hurry up as well."

Sayama looked at the figures surrounding them. They stood in the forest without fear.

…How brave.

"But due to their history, 2nd-Gear has not realized the full possibilities of their concepts."

"Eh?"

Everyone around him tilted their heads.

"What exactly is a name?" he asked them.

Shinjou supplied an answer.

"It is a proper noun, isn't it? It is a noun associated with something specific. It is a type of symbol used to distinguish people and things from other people or things."

"Yes, and that is where the problem lies. In fact, I would say there are two problems there," explained Sayama. "The first is quite simple, so let us test it out immediately."

He grabbed Boldman's head in front of him.

And then he looked to the west.

His gaze stopped on three figures approaching through the forest.

After a moment, they stood up.

Sayama estimated they were fifteen meters away. All three of them wielded swords in the darkness.

Sayama used a hand to stop those who wanted to take action.

“Now, let us have a language lesson. Are names given only to physical objects?”

As he asked his question, the enemies crouched down and prepared to dash forward.

As soon as they took their first step, Shinjou’s voice rang out.

“N-no! They are also given to physical phenomena and abstract theories!”

In the very next moment, roaring voices and countless footsteps filled the forest.

2nd-Gear had begun to move.

And as Sayama waited for them, he had a smile on his face.

He watched the blades of the approaching enemies.

"Precisely, Shinjou-kun. 2nd-Gear has grown so fixated on the names they give themselves that they have lost sight of everything else. And that is why this never occurred to them."

The enemy left the forest and entered the clearing.

At the same time, Sayama shoved Boldman's head toward the enemy.

"Attack names will give form to the attack itself!" he shouted. And then he raised his voice even further. " Baldman – Bald Flash!!"

With a roar, light shot from Boldman.

After a light appeared in the center of the forest and pointed to the west, its power took effect instantly.

It looked less like a sphere of light and more like an expanded version of Boldman's face.

The giant face made of light had its teeth bared and it expanded even further while devouring the trees, the earth, and the air.

In the blink of an eye, it became an explosion of light with a radius of two hundred meters.

The light sounded like spraying water.

It produced enough of an impact to blow everything away.

"…!"

The western side of the forest was blasted into the distance without time to breathe.

The attacking members of 2nd-Gear were not even able to cling to the ground. The expansion of the sphere of light ripped them up and into the air.

The light produced destruction.

But it disappeared an instant later.

However, even that slight time had been enough to leave its mark.

It had whipped up a wind which rustled through the remaining trees. Below that, the crust was exposed on the ground.

The people and trees that had been blown away flew into the distance in a parabolic arc. Once they landed and stopped rolling, they did not move.

Everyone who saw that destruction froze in place. That was especially true for the 2nd-Gear members who were trying to surround Team Leviathan from all directions.

They turned toward the source of the destruction and the whirling wind. There they saw a boy.

Sayama Mikoto held the head of a large black man.

Nothing was moving except for the wind and the leaves of the trees.

Amid it all, Sayama turned toward his group.

“This was a bit of a gamble, but it appears to have worked well. It appears that it must be based on a common perception that no one can deny.”

“Y-you idiot!”

Boldman stood up in front of Sayama.

Sayama looked up at him.

“Hm. I am not sure why you look so angry. That was very useful, was it not?”

“Y-you may be my commander, but there are some things you just don’t do! …Ah.”

Boldman’s knees then collapsed out from under him.

Sayama understood why the man was shaking his head in confusion.

“It seems using this power takes away physical strength. That may have shortened your lifespan by about 100 days.”

“Y-y’know… Kh!”

Boldman tried to stand up but let out a strange cry and toppled forward.

Rather than catch him, Sayama let gravity take over. As he collapsed, Kazami appeared behind him with her hand up in a chopping pose.

"Kaku, tie him up," she said with a serious expression. "We can have someone without a weapon use him."

"Yeah, I've never seen a better living weapon."

"But try not to fire randomly. You do not want to hit one of our own people. …What is it? Is something the matter?"

"I don't care if it's a joke. Can you at least say you're worried about me?"

Some men arrived with a rope which they used to tie up Boldman and turn him into a weapon.

"Now, then. I am sure you have something similar in your own fantasies. As close-combat specialists, you must have given it at least some thought. You must have felt the attack you thought up is unbeatable. If you have an idea and you believe in that idea, then shout it out. If your feelings are real, the attack will follow."

"I see," said Izumo as he tightened the ropes restraining Boldman.

He gently grabbed Kazami's breasts so as to lift them up.

"Kazami Boob Bea- Gwoh!?"

"I'm not letting you fire anything from there!!"

After jabbing her elbow behind her, Kazami frowned.

"We have weapons already, so we don't need to bother with that. …Hm? What? Why do you look so unhappy?"

As everyone nodded in agreement, the circling wind of the Bald Flash finally escaped into the sky.

Sayama watched everyone as they watched the wind leave.

His gaze met Ooshiro's and the old man held up Georgius's case.

That was when someone raised her hand. It was Shinjou.

"U-um, Sayama-kun? I was so overwhelmed by the Bald Flash that I forget to ask something."

"Mh? What is it?"

"What is the other problem regarding 2nd-Gear's names that you mentioned? You never told us."

"Oh, that is simple, so I was planning to explain it last."

Sayama nodded and looked around.

2nd-Gear's forces were beginning to move after being stopped by the previous attack.

But instead of rushing in, they were now approaching slowly and cautiously.

As Sayama watched them, he spoke.

"Think of the names Susanoo, Takemikazuchi, and Tsukuyomi. From a Low-Gear perspective, they are all missing something. Something everyone in Low-Gear has. …Can you tell me what that is?"

“Eh?” asked Shinjou as she furrowed her brow.

“Think about it, Shinjou Sadagiri-kun.”

Chapter 28: Song of Battle

Chapter 28

“Song of Battle”

Sing the war song of unavoidable conflict
People stand on the battlefield of inevitability
They await an anticipated answer

Sing the war song of unavoidable conflict

People stand on the battlefield of inevitability

They await an anticipated answer

The battle began once more.

Tsukuyomi stood on the northern field in front of the forest. From there, she saw the enemy emerge from the opposite forest.

They numbered about half of what they had when they had entered the forest. Sayama and his group were not among them.

But they advanced with great force.

…They have some sort of plan.

She heard their battle cries, their footsteps, and the blowing wind.

Riding on the momentum of those three noises, the white combat uniforms clashed once more.

With the protection of their concepts, 2nd-Gear had the upper hand.

But something bothered Tsukuyomi: the boy and girl who had charged into battle earlier. Sayama and Shinjou.

Especially…

…The way Shinjou used Ex-St.

According to the records, she had never used the full ability of her Cowling Staff. Ex-St would remove its limiter in accordance with its user's will and it would even destroy itself with its maximum power.

That wall of light had not been the weapon's full power.

"But that was different from normal."

What had she done?

Tsukuyomi knew the answer: she was beginning to accept her own will. It was the same as a newborn animal becoming aware of its own body and standing up to get a closer look at its parent's face.

"Perhaps we should view this differently."

I just hope this decision isn't too late, thought Tsukuyomi as she spoke to the managers around her.

"Everyone, move forward!"

Many male voices let out a cry in response.

Forward.

They would tread on the grass and go forward to the land the moonlight had fallen on.

As they advanced, their vanguard collided with the enemy on the other side of the field.

As Tsukuyomi watched, she saw something odd.

"Light?"

It was the enemy.

2nd-Gear had supposedly exhausted the enemy's weapons and cut off their supplies, but they were firing light, darkness, flames, and ice. As she tried to remember if they had ever created weapons like that, an elderly manager spoke from next to her.

"To me, it looks like they are firing strange beams from their hands, feet, and eyes."

A closer examination showed most of the projectiles were coming from Ooshiro Kazuo.

While striking strange poses, shouting strange things, and smiling, light shot from his hands and feet. He would even summon a strange black shadow from his laptop screen which would blow away his enemy.

"Wa ha ha ha ha ha ha! Take this! Miyoko's Wrath!"

Tsukuyomi did not hesitate to fire moonlight at him.

This produced an explosion, but…

"Miyoko Barrier!"

A dark dome appeared in the field and an unharmed voice came from within.

“What do you think you’re doing, Director Tsukuyomi !? This is my youth!!”

Once Tsukuyomi realized her words were not going to reach him, she fired more moonlight at the barrier.

“You are an embarrassment to Japan!!”

She fired five times in a row. The third shot shattered the barrier and the fifth struck him.

For some reason, the old man looked delighted as he was blown away.

And so she fired another shot. Light exploded out and the surrounding people let out a cheer.

But Ooshiro quickly stood back up and threw his arms into the air.

“St-stop that! Is it that fun blasting me across the field! ?”

"Try acting your age, UCAT Director Ooshiro! Your son is going to throw you to the ground again!"

Tsukuyomi's warning produced applause from the elderly managers around her. They then began chanting.

"Once more! Once more! We want to see you show off some more!"

"Fine then. I'll make it flashy this time." She smiled as she drew the bowstring. "I don't quite have a full charge, but this will do!"

As the light dispersed, she fired the large bowstring toward the sky.

It produced a high-pitched tone and light fell from the sky.

"Come, light of the moon!"

Not as much light fell this time, but it was limited to the grassy field.

A few dozen beams of light poured down to the earth.

…Will this finish it?

But then she froze in place.

In the center of her vision, a new group exited the distant forest.

Tsukuyomi recognized them.

Sayama, Shinjou, Izumo, and Kazami were in the lead. Following them was a group of people in combat uniforms.

Kazami and Izumo ran toward her.

Sayama and Shinjou also ran toward-

"No."

Those two were not looking at anyone.

They were focused on Susaou behind her.

But…

"Before you reach Susaou, you have to escape the falling moonlight! How will you manage that!?"

Tsukuyomi's shouted question received a response.

It was a song. It was a Low-Gear hymn.

A female voice from the forest calmly sang Silent Night.

Silent night Holy night

Brought the world peace tonight,

From the heavens' golden height

Shows the grace of His holy might

Jesus, as man on this earth

Jesus, as man on this earth

As if reacting to the meaning of those words, the hammer of moonlight weakened.

It grew quieter and thinner. The moonlight returned to being normal light and merely illuminated the field.

"…!"

Tsukuyomi gasped and the singer's voice continued from the forest.

The singer had long blonde hair. One of the elderly managers near Tsukuyomi spoke the singer's name.

"Sibyl. She's a maintenance girl who knows a lot about gods of war and automatons. She has the name of a goddess and blonde hair, so how about we invite her to the development department?"

"Don't I provide enough femininity to the department ?"

"Not nearly enough," said all the elderly managers.

Tsukuyomi smiled bitterly, but she did not relax the hand drawing her bowstring.

"Well, this battle isn't over yet and we have the advantage."

The appearance of these new enemies from the forest caused her allies to change their means of attack.

Those with flight-associated names attacked from the air.

From what Tsukuyomi remembered, Kazami was the only member of Team Leviathan who could fly.

None of the others had surnames with the same meaning.

“Here they come,” said one of the elderly managers with a bit of surprise in his voice.

And then Tsukuyomi saw a few members of Team Leviathan do something unexpected.

“They’re flying?”

Their movements were hesitant, but they rose into the air as if climbing stairs and they began to use their weapons.

As she wondered what was happening, Tsukuyomi drew her bowstring even tighter. And she aimed horizontally toward Kazami and Izumo.

“It can’t be!!”

Among those who had remained in the forest, a small figure stood with a cat and a bird.

"The two name system, hm?" said Brunhild in exasperation. "So that's the simple thing related to names that Sayama was talking about before."

Next to her, Sf nodded from next to Itaru.

"2nd-Gear's names indicate a role, so they are analogous to Low-Gear's surnames. 2nd-Gear is a group of engineers, so they treat their surnames as their true names. They view their given name as nothing more than a number to distinguish between family members."

Diana, who stood next to Sf, picked up where the automaton left off.

"But in Low-Gear, surnames became symbolized and given names drew more focus."

She went on to explain why those Team Leviathan members could fly.

"They have sky, wind, or other characters related to weather phenomena and animals in their given names. In

this country, the characters for fly, mist, light, and dragon are almost always used in the given name rather than the surname."

Brunhild nodded and looked beyond the forest.

Past the trees, the heavens opened up. Shouts and light were produced there.

"Are you worried about them?" asked Diana.

"I wouldn't say that. I was asked to inspect, so I am watching."

"Oh, dear." Diana shrugged and turned toward Itaru. "Itaru, I thought your father chose her as 1st-Gear's inspector because-…"

"That's right. To keep an eye on you."

"Heh," bitterly laughed Brunhild.

She took a step back in order to move away from Diana.

And then she glared up at the woman.

"I don't care why I was given the position. As long as I can monitor such an infuriating woman so she can't make petty complaints about Team Leviathan, that's enough. So let's try to get along, just as Siegfried asked us to."

"That isn't a very nice way to put it. I am not going to make any petty complaints." Diana sharply narrowed her eyes and formed a gentle smile. "As soon as I find a problem, I will crush it on the spot."

"For German UCAT's sake?"

"No. This is not for German UCAT or for myself. If I had to say, I would say it is for everything that was lost to reach this point."

"Everything that was lost? Like what? The destroyed Gears?"

"You only think that because you still know nothing."

"…"

"No one knows what truly happened in our past."

Brunhild silently listened to that statement.

After a while, she picked up the black cat at her feet.

"Fine. I will overlook it for tonight. I cannot use my spells well in 2nd-Gear's concepts."

"Oh? It does not bother me if you do not overlook it. My spells are perfectly strong 24/7."

"Is that so?" Brunhild narrowed her eyes and stared up at Diana. "I suppose that's what happens when you carry around fuel in your breasts. Perhaps I do not need to sympathize with your lack of experience now. Just so you know, I only showed you about 20% of my true power at the school."

"Oh, my. That was only about 15% for me."

"Wait, I miscounted. It may have been about 5%."

After watching those two repeatedly reassess their number with a smile, Sf turned to Itaru.

"Which one is giving a false report?"

"Neither one is true, but both of them are serious."

As soon as Itaru spoke, Diana and Brunhild moved away from each other.

The cat looked up in Brunhild's arm.

"Eh? Wait. Wh-why aren't you putting me down?"

"That cat will not function as a shield. This will shoot right through him."

"Hmph. He's no normal cat. He can probably withstand one shot. …Hang in there, okay?"

"D-don't I get a say!?"

The cat's protests and struggling were stopped by a tight embrace.

The two witches exchanged a smile and both said " now then".

And then five figures charged from the forest to the right.

"Supervisor Ooshiro Itaru of Team Leviathan! This is Mikami and Katori of the development department!"

Five young men appeared wielding swords.

The man in the lead, Mikami, turned toward the other four.

“Let’s use our standard…”

He trailed off.

He had spotted the two witches glaring at each other.

“…”

Silence fell.

As Mikami and the other four remained motionless, Brunhild slowly turned toward them.

“Heh. Looks like we have some good targets to compare our strength on.”

“Oh? It isn’t often I agree with you. Who will go first?”

“Eh?” said the group of five as they stepped back.

“W-wait a second.” Mikami spread his arms. “Why is German UCAT and 1st-Gear…”

"Keep quiet, target! But when I blow you away, make sure to give a proper scream."

"That's right."

The two witches caused the five men's faces to stiffen and freeze.

And then…

"Please stop." With a dignified voice, Sf ran in front of Diana and Brunhild. "The inspectors are not permitted to take part in the battle."

The two groaned and stopped moving.

After a moment, Mikami began frantically nodding.

"Th-that's right. If anyone is going to attack us, make it Team Leviathan."

Sf nodded and looked at the group of five and group of two.

After making sure they were all looking at her, she nodded and brought her heels together.

"Tes. I am pleased you all understand. I have determined this is thanks to the negotiation program I have installed. If you were impressed, please email your thoughts to the SF development team of German UCAT. Lately, they have been delighted even if you write 'bravo ', but 'khorosho' is still strictly forbidden."

"U-um? Sf? That is all well and good, but what should we do about the immediate situation?"

After a moment of confusion, the 2nd-Gear men finally began to nod.

From behind Mikami, the plump Katori wiped sweat from his brow and looked toward Sf.

"Surely you aren't going to fight us. Low-Gear weaponry is almost entirely meaningless here."

"Tes. I appreciate your concern, but I exist as a piece of Team Leviathan's equipment. You can rest easy while thinking of me as a piece of equipment."

Sf's words brought a confused look to Itaru's face.

"I've never once been able to rest easy around you."

"Itaru-sama, when you truly rest easy, you do not even realize it is happening."

"Oh? Then what is the strange thrill I feel around you every day?"

"Tes. That is a pinch of spice to combat the boring routine of life."

Itaru silently turned to Diana and she frantically shook her head.

"A-are you sure this thought pattern didn't come from how you formatted her?"

"I should have known you would weasel out of any responsibility."

"Um…listen, Sf. Itaru is saying he's curious how you will fight."

Diana's frantic comment led Sf to look at Itaru. He nodded in annoyance.

"Handle this in a way that will delight your opponent, okay?"

"Tes. In that case, please look at this equipment, everyone."

Sf bowed. She then lifted up the right side of her skirt and stuck her hand inside.

"It was developed in order to instantly defeat one hundred approaching enemies. Once it proved able to do exactly that, everyone began to refer to it by the name of its creator and that name gained the meaning of singlehandedly defeating great numbers of enemies on the battlefield."

When she pulled her hand out, it was accompanied by a black mass of steel almost two meters long.

The thick barrel could have easily been mistaken for a cannon and it was made by fixing together six rifle barrels.

"This is the Gatling gun. As I have prepared this for tonight, I have determined I can more than meet your needs."

Sf lowered her waist as she held up the heavy weapon.

"Also, my name is Sein Frau. I exist and fight to meet my master's demands. I ask that you too give this everything you have."

And as she spoke, the 2nd-Gear men's expressions stiffened.

"Y-you ask…? And how did you fit something so large under your skirt!?"

Sf faced them as she answered.

"I have many as-yet unseen features to make every new day enjoyable. I am German UCAT's hidden masterpiece, so please look forward to what I will do in the future."

Sf formed a mechanical smile.

Itaru had instructed her to do so and she knew what she had to say afterwards.

Itaru had said these words would delight the person she spoke them to.

And so she spoke to Mikami and the others with the mechanical smile on her lips.

“Die or go to hell.”

The attack began.

Sibyl sang in the center of the unit while Sayama and the others ran forward.

Sayama and the others at the front of the group had to break through the enemy lines.

Sayama swung up Georgius on his left arm and shouted out.

"Go ahead!"

The others cried out as they prepared to clash with the enemy.

On the grassy field and below the moonlight, Sayama ran alongside Shinjou while Izumo and Kazami ran ahead.

They kicked off the dirt as they approached the metal giant beyond the enemy lines and beyond the forest.

Kazami led the group as she ran directly toward it.

And she was backed by Sibyl's singing voice.

"Brought the world peace tonight."

That is exactly right, thought Sayama as he thought about the meaning of the lyrics.

He realized Shinjou was quietly singing the song next to him.

"Show the grace of His holy might."

…That is exactly what we must do on this night.

As he thought and ran, he approached the enemy's main unit.

They were thirty meters apart.

Tsukuyomi's group and Sayama's group stared at each other.

The one group ran forward to attack while the other waited.

And then the enemy took action.

Specifically, Tsukuyomi did.

While holding her large black bow, she suddenly moved away from her unit.

"Is she trying to leave Sibyl's song?" asked Sayama.

Kazami clicked her tongue up ahead.

"They're taking this seriously for a mock battle. They know they'll win if they defeat us here!"

Kazami began running even faster. She began moving in the same direction as Tsukuyomi.

"I'll take care of that old woman! And Sayama! You know Yamata's question and answer, right? And you've thought of a way to deal with the flames and heat when Yamata is released, right? It would really cheer me up if you were burned to death, though!"

"Unfortunately, Kazami, I do not think you will be very cheerful once this is all over."

Shinjou turned a worried glance in his direction, so Sayama continued speaking.

"I have thought about both and have made the proper preparations. Go, you two. Finish your battle. You have yet to get back at her for striking you with moonlight earlier, have you?"

"We'll be making a triumphant return before you can!"

Kazami took a large step forward as she turned fully toward Tsukuyomi.

Izumo followed, so only Sayama and Shinjou continued toward Susaou.

Tsukuyomi smiled bitterly as she saw Kazami and Izumo pursuing her through the forest.

…Yes. That's how you do it.

This was a mock battle. It was a fight between comrades where everyone held back so as not to kill anyone.

…But this is 2nd-Gear's final battle against Low-Gear.

If 2nd-Gear had not been destroyed by Yamata sixty years prior, this battle might have happened for real.

"It may be for the best that Ooshiro Hiromasa was unable to save 2nd-Gear."

If 2nd-Gear had not become naturalized to Low-Gear, Kazami and Izumo would not have had that strength in

their gaze as they charged toward her and Sayama and Shinjou would not have headed toward their goal with such determination.

…And Kashima, Atsuta, and the other young ones wouldn't have acted the way they have.

She wondered what her husband would have thought of this battle if he were still alive.

She had been told he had died as a secondary casualty of the great Kansai earthquake at the end of '95, but she did not believe that.

She believed it had not been an accident and she believed "something" had happened there.

…Did he know the world would turn out like this?

She did not know the answer.

…What if he died so that the world could turn out like this?

"And as the ones who remained behind, it is our job to give meaning to this world."

She looked up as she ran through the forest.

She could see the moon through the leaves. The shadows weakened the moonlight.

And two people energetically pursued her about fifteen meters behind.

Those people were Izumo and Kazami. Even in the dark forest, they remained perfectly by each other's side.

They made a good pair.

But what should she do?

As she thought, Tsukuyomi looked toward the Heavenly Moon Bow in her left arm.

"I only have one shot like this."

Sayama and Shinjou ran out from the path through the forest.

Their eyes had adjusted to the darkness, so the moonlight blinded them a bit.

However, that light did not attack them.

They safely entered the clearing in front of the lake.

Once their eyes adjusted, they looked at the weed-filled clearing, at the lake, and at the pier.

“Susaou…”

That giant dark shadow stood on the lake surface.

And two figures stood before the pier leading out to Susaou.

One was Kashima who held a laptop.

The other was Atsuta who rested a giant metal sword on his shoulder.

After exchanging a glance with both, Sayama nodded.

“We have arrived.”

“So you made it.”

Kashima sounded relieved and he nodded before looking at his laptop.

"During the battle here, I will be adjusting Futsuno's output in real time. I want to ensure the power's torque pattern is constantly rising. That means we will essentially have two people fighting."

"Are you saying the two of us should take on that blade-happy man?"

"Hah! Don't make me laugh, Sayama's brat! Even working together, you don't stand a chance against me!"

Atsuta's words made Sayama notice an aching in his chest.

"Sayama's…?"

Atsuta's comment had meant that he was the child of Sayama.

…Did he know my father?

As Sayama looked over, Atsuta gave a smile that showed off his canine teeth.

"Ryouko was my classmate. I always heard her speak so fondly of your father. I might know him better than

you do. And I know about the bomb in your chest as well . …I saw what happened when you spoke with Kashima in the cafeteria.”

Sayama gasped a bit.

The usual pain returned to the left side of his chest.

Atsuta continued speaking while focusing on the right hand Sayama used to clutch his chest.

“Well, the night is young. I can finish you off after having some fun. Ryouko told me to stop you if you were trying to do something dangerous, so I’ll stop you from doing anything dangerous ever again.”

“I retract the request in her stead. She was being foolish.”

“What?”

“She knows full well that I can only advance while experiencing danger,” he declared.

Something wrapped around his left hand. It was Shinjou’s right hand.

Her slender hand gripped Georgius on his left hand.

The ends of her eyebrows were raised slightly, but she nodded with a smile.

“Let’s defeat them.”

Her words produced a bitter laugh from Kashima.

And Sayama nodded when he heard it.

He faced forward and stared at the two men of 2nd-Gear and the giant behind them.

“We shall win,” he said as he moved forward.

Kazami and Izumo ran through the forest.

They pursued Tsukuyomi who ran fifteen meters ahead of them.

However…

“We can’t get any closer!”

Light flew toward them. It was a shot of moonlight. In the shadows of the forest, it was slender and weak.

But at a distance of fifteen meters, it was not completely weakened.

If it hit them as they ran, they would be blown away.

“Could this be any more annoying!?”

Izumo chopped the flying beam of light with V-Sw and a word appeared on the weapon’s console.

“Bored?”

“My tactics aren’t matching up well. If I could only use the second form…”

But the rules of the mock battle prevented that, so Kazami could only agree with him.

In the forest, she could not bring out the wings of X-Wi and fly. If she did try, she could easily run into a tree.

And so she ran and thought.

…Are we being tested?

More light arrived from ahead of them and Izumo destroyed it again. Tsukuyomi's shots were both accurately aimed and accurately timed. She never missed the mark and she would fire whenever they were trying to catch a breath.

…But it's weak.

That may have been due to the forest. Tsukuyomi had not fired a thick beam of light ever since entering the forest.

And since she was firing repeatedly like this…

"She can't charge up and send moonlight down from the sky."

Kazami then wondered what Tsukuyomi's goal was.

The moonlight was weak in the forest, so why had she entered it?

"There isn't anywhere convenient to the moon."

…Wait. Yes, there is.

As she ran, she looked up. She saw what lay ahead.

Needless to say, she saw lines of trees ahead, so she could not easily judge where she was.

But she knew the terrain after investigating the forest the other day.

“This forest surrounds the artificial lake and it has rivers running through it!”

Even in a forest, the shielding trees would not exist on the river.

If Tsukuyomi stood in the moonlit river, she would be able to draw out the full power of the bow and her name.

And that was precisely what Kazami saw.

There was a break in the forest visible in the distance.

Seeing it startled her.

As if to further her panic, the sounds of a river reached her ears.

Izumo clicked his tongue next to her.

"What do we do, Chisato? Should we keep going, knowing she's luring us there!?"

Kazami considered Tsukuyomi's strength and their own.

She and Izumo lacked mobility.

Tsukuyomi lacked attack power. Even on the river, she would only be able to fire horizontally if she wanted to fire repeatedly.

That left a single answer. Kazami cried out to her own equipment.

"We have to defeat her before she can make it to the river! X-Wi, let's go!"

"You idiot! Are you going to fly!?"

"No!" shouted Kazami as she leaned forward.

At the same time, words scrolled along the watch on her left wrist.

—Light is power.

As if proving those words true, wings of light shot out of her backpack.

Kazami knew what she had to do.

She had seen this method in the battle with 1st-Gear. The half-dragon named Fafner had not used his wings to fly.

“He used them to accelerate and turn!”

As soon as the wings took shape, she faced forward.

Tsukuyomi was just about to leave the forest.

If she was going to do this…

“It has to be now!”

As she cried out, Kazami moved forward. An explosion of wind appeared behind her back.

Instead of flying, she began racing forward.

Chapter 29: Seeing Through the Lies

Chapter 29

“Seeing Through the Lies”

There is no need to see through a lie
But there is also no need to permit an empty falsehood
See through those in order to save something

There is no need to see through a lie

But there is also no need to permit an empty falsehood

See through those in order to save something

Sayama moved through the moonlit clearing.

His left hand, the hand that once formed a fist, now held Georgius and a sword.

He felt a slight phantom pain from the scars on his fist, but it was small enough to put up with.

He stepped forward.

He swung the sword toward Atsuta.

Atsuta evaded by bending his body to the right.

He swung Futsuno horizontally.

That was when covering fire came from behind Sayama.

Shinjou fired three shots of light from her staff. They flew toward Atsuta with both vertical and horizontal gaps.

And they hit. Or they should have.

Sayama saw Atsuta alter Futsuno's path.

The sword heading horizontally toward Sayama suddenly shot up vertically.

The blade's path drew a fan shape and moved to the man's right side.

Rotating the large blade produced a certain result.

The light fired by Shinjou flew past Atsuta.

"…"

Sayama heard Shinjou gasp.

But he had expected this. And he had already taken his next action.

Atsuta dropped the sword down from the right, so his left side was wide open.

And so Sayama swung in the silver arc in his left hand.

Atsuta smiled bitterly.

“You have good instincts. Where were you taught?”

Part of the training at the Hiba Dojo included techniques to stand up to a swinging blade. Sayama used those techniques to move up to Atsuta in an instant as the man’s blade sliced through the air.

Atsuta moved back.

Sayama only heard a single footstep, but the man quickly moved back a large distance.

In an instant, he created a space of about five meters between them and Sayama’s blade sliced through air.

There was a gap between them now.

“…”

They both prepared their next stances at the same time .

Sayama prepared to charge in.

He wanted to move straight forward.

And in that instant, Atsuta suddenly spoke.

“I think that’s about enough warming up.”

Then he vanished.

Or rather, Sayama was no longer able to perceive him.

“!”

This was the Art of Walking.

Kazami held G-Sp2 as she ran.

She was fifteen meters from her opponent. She needed to instantly bring that down to zero.

As the wings on her back produced wind, she literally flew forward.

She moved quickly.

And her high-speed movement brought the trees of the forest toward her.

Her tension had narrowed her vision, so she perceived the trees rushing toward her as shadows.

Straight, right, and right.

Then she forcibly corrected her path to the left.

“…!”

She lightly flapped her wings and stepped on the ground.

The combination of the two actions supported her movements.

She moved so quickly that it swept away her sweat in an instant.

Simply flapping her wings would launch her forward.

While moving so swiftly, she could only rely on her own senses.

…And my name.

Kazami Chisato.

As Kazami, her eyes read the wind. As Chisato, her running feet covered great distances.

The distance was down to five meters.

A single light came from ahead.

But it did not matter. She tilted her head to the side and it flew past her cheek.

"And I keep running!"

She did not stop her movements or lessen her focus. She simply continued her acceleration to the end.

"Go!"

Her feet produced the white steam of an atmospheric explosion and she blasted her body forward.

She flew.

But not into the heavens. She flew forward.

At high speed, she slipped between the last trees and covered the last bit of distance.

At the same time, light arrived before her eyes.

It was an aimed shot of moonlight. As a counterattack, it had been fired at almost point blank range.

“!”

But Kazami did not hesitate.

She swung up G-Sp2 and thrust it forward

The Cowling Spear stabbed through the air and collided with the light while wrapped in a white steam.

She could feel it hit.

A white noise burst and the light scattered in every direction.

And she looked beyond it.

If she continued forward and blew away Tsukuyomi, they would win.

However…

"She's gone!?"

Beyond the scattered light, Tsukuyomi was nowhere to be seen.

Or rather, Kazami could not perceive her.

"Chisato!"

Izumo's voice caused her to tremble.

Before she could even think the term "Art of Walking", she stopped breathing and stiffened.

There was one way to break through 2nd-Gear's Art of Walking which worked by syncing with one's opponent.

…Intentionally disrupt your heart rate and such to break the sync!

She had succeeded doing so against Izumo on the rooftop the night before.

She held her breath, gathered strength to encourage the flow of blood, and widened the focus of her vision.

"…There!"

Right in front of her, Tsukuyomi held her large bow with an expression of exhaustion.

But the lost instant had been too much.

Tsukuyomi had already twisted her body around and avoided the attack.

She leaped out of the forest.

Meanwhile, Kazami flew out of the forest and right past her.

The river lay ahead of her.

The flowing water was only about five meters wide, but it was plenty large to bathe in the moonlight.

As she cautiously viewed Tsukuyomi's stance, she gasped.

As she fell toward the river, she saw Tsukuyomi head toward the river and aim the bow up toward the sky.

"After firing so much, you can't possibly have charged up any…"

Her shout of protest trailed off when she saw the truth before her eyes.

As Tsukuyomi drew the bow with her right arm, the center of the bowstring was wrapped around the elbow.

That elbow drew the bow tightly.

The bowstring sank into her skin to the point that blood dripped down.

"Don't tell me you've been drawing the bowstring with your elbow this entire time!"

"I've been shooting at you by plucking the half of the bowstring above my elbow. The entire time in the forest, I've been charging up using my elbow."

Just as the old woman spoke, Kazami and Tsukuyomi both landed in the river.

They were approximately five meters apart.

Tsukuyomi stood on the riverbed, but Kazami's stance had collapsed.

She fell to the riverbed as if rolling forward and she thrust her hands into the water to catch herself.

She frantically got up while looking up at Tsukuyomi.

"You put up a good effort. I'll give you that."

The old woman nodded and fired the bow into the sky .

The vibration caused the blood on her arm to scatter and the air was dyed faintly red.

In the next moment, light fell from the sky. And this light was much larger than any the bow had produced before.

It fell toward Kazami in an instant.

Atsuta moved forward.

The two people standing before him were not looking at him and were hesitant to move.

Their eyes moved slightly, but their gazes were wandering aimlessly.

That showed that his Art of Walking was working.

He suddenly looked down at his right hand.

Behind him and to the right, Kashima stood in front of the pier while operating his laptop. Atsuta felt as if water was tilting within Futsuno as he held it. This was due to Kashima distributing its weight in real time.

“Don’t get too serious, Kashima. It’s already time to finish them off.”

“I’m close to drawing up a pattern. Plus, I want data on slow movements like this as well as normal combat.”

“I want a fast sports car, not a Royal Saloon that’s only worthwhile at low speeds.”

“An engineer should want stability during both heavy usage and light usage.”

"Is that so?"

Atsuta's shoulders drooped and he walked up to Sayama.

He was about three meters away. Sayama would need to take two steps to attack with his sword, but Futsuno's reach only required a single step.

Atsuta stepped forward, but then he stopped.

He did not attack.

After a slight moment of irritation, he spoke.

"Now, then. Getting in a good attack and making you bow down to me naked would be nice, but someone as wise as me is concerned about one thing." Confidence filled his voice. "Sayama Mikoto. As the representative of the Leviathan Road, I highly doubt you haven't analyzed our Art of Walking."

Sayama heard Atsuta speak.

He had already seen through the man's Art of Walking .

He had seen a portion of the man's ability in the cafeteria and he had realized the principle behind the Art of Walking when Ryuutetsu had thrown him.

The Art of Walking was a difficult technique to use, but it was very simple to break once you knew the principle behind it.

He had only needed to feign falling victim to it and counterattack once Atsuta approached.

But Atsuta gave an exaggerated shake of the head.

"For example, you could break free by holding your breath the instant you failed to perceive me. That would destroy the sync," he said. "But I'm not going to bother to check whether you've done that."

He held up Futsuno.

His expression made it clear he was no longer playing around. And his voice contained no hint of ridicule.

"Listen, Sayama. Cut the act and fight me."

Sayama maintained his silence.

He could not determine what Atsuta was trying to do.

He could not even tell if Atsuta knew he had broken the Art of Walking or if he was only testing.

But then Atsuta gave him the answer.

"Ryouko trusts you. There's no way someone like that wouldn't break free of my Art of Walking."

Sayama gasped.

"…"

And he straightened up. As he did, he heard Shinjou gasp behind him.

But he did not care. He faced Atsuta and spoke.

"Sword gods have become quite sentimental these days."

"I'm grateful." Atsuta held up Futsuno. "Let's have a proper fight, ladies' man. Unlike just now, I'll use an Art of Walking tailored especially for you. Try breaking free of that and attacking me."

"An Art of Walking tailored especially for me?"

Atsuta tightened his grip on Futsuno.

"It's simple. I force you into sync with me. In other words, I control your body."

"You cannot control my-…"

"Oh, yes I can. With you, I can."

"With me?"

What is he going to do? wondered Sayama.

Atsuta's next comment seemed to be in response to his thoughts.

"Well? You want me to tell you, don't you? You want to know what words I can use to control your body." He tilted his head. "Hadn't you ever wondered why exactly Ryouko trusts you?"

"I have. It is a bit of a mystery why Ryouko has such a high opinion of me."

Atsuta stepped forward and raised Futsuno above his head.

"I'll tell you," he said expressionlessly. "I heard her talk about him so many times. She said your father was kind and smart. I heard her say there was no problem he couldn't solve. That is how she felt about your Sayama Asagi, your father!"

Sayama suddenly heard his father's name.

He had expected to hear something about himself, but that name stabbed at him instead.

"!"

That single name brought a reflexive scream to the left side of his chest.

He instinctually bent over from the pain and Atsuta shouted out as if providing the finishing blow.

"She once delightedly told me that his son was exactly like him!"

His words called in the past.

For just an instant, he recalled his father.

…Not good!

His rejecting will outdid the memories.

He knew even less of that existence than of his mother and he had sealed the memories deep in his heart. These references to him brought a squeezing pain to his chest. The pain was intense.

"…Kh."

His voice leaked from his throat as if his lungs were being crushed.

"Does it hurt? That pain is how I will control you!"

At the same time, Atsuta vanished from his perception .

The man had stepped into his pain.

For a moment, he entered his memories and wondered if his father was truly the kind of person Ryouko said he was, but then he turned his thoughts to the present.

…Those are indeed words which can control my body.

As he doubled over, he heard Atsuta's voice.

"It's too bad, Sayama's brat. Ryouko has a lot of issues …but she doesn't lie! You did well, but that ends here!"

As he spoke, Atsuta truly vanished.

Moonlight fell from the sky and toward the forest river .

Tsukuyomi faced her prey while standing in the river with the water up to her knees.

That prey was Kazami.

She was one of the two main vanguard members of Team Leviathan. Two years prior, she had been caught in the middle of a battle started by 6th-Gear remnants attacking a Concept Core transport. As a result, she had become the master of G-Sp and X-Wi.

It had been Tsukuyomi and the development department that had altered G-Sp into G-Sp2 for her and fine-tuned X-Wi.

…You are something like a daughter to us.

"Which means we need you to be able to turn back the power of this light."

But Kazami was currently on her hands and knees in the river and she could not move. She would be unable to read the wind now. The wings of light growing from her back were dim and beginning to vanish.

"In that case…" replied someone else.

It was Izumo. He charged from the forest and leaped toward Kazami's back.

While in midair, he held his sword down and opened his mouth.

"Ah!"

He cried out and launched an attack just as he landed in the river.

It is useless, thought Tsukuyomi.

She knew V-Sw's abilities by heart.

…Using its first form is not enough to defeat the falling moonlight.

What were they going to do? Were they simply going to use their weapons as tools of power?

Immediately afterwards, Izumo shouted out and shattered Tsukuyomi's thoughts.

"Ahhhhh!!"

As he let out a roar, he swung V-Sw up from below.

But he was not targeting the moonlight.

"The water!?"

As Tsukuyomi watched, a great splash rose up behind Kazami.

The strike had used the full power of the weapon's first form, so it thoroughly swept up the river's water.

It produced a reverse waterfall.

And Izumo shouted loud enough to be heard over the din of water.

"Chisato! Quit pointing your ass at me and raise your wings!"

Kazami raised her head.

She looked into the sky and saw the falling pillar of moonlight.

Tsukuyomi also watched the moonlight as it arrived directly above them and…

"Into the spray…"

The water Izumo had sent into the air struck the light.

The collision between moonlight and water lasted an instant.

But it did not produce destruction. It did not produce an explosion, a shockwave, or collapse.

It produced harmony.

It was water and light. The great amount of airborne water reflected the moonlight, took it inside, reflected it inside itself, and scattered it everywhere.

The moonlight danced through the sky.

And Tsukuyomi saw Kazami crouch down below the water and light.

Her expression could now be described as an acute angle and a voice escaped her throat.

“Thanks, Kaku.”

And with that, she formed a smile and light shot from the two wings stretching up from her back.

The concept activated.

—Light is power.

In an instant, her wings of light grew past two meters in length and they did not stop here.

They took in the moonlight.

"This power…is the same!"

The wings responded to Kazami's shout. As they rose up into the sky, they stabbed into the glowing water and absorbed the light that had been scattered by that water.

With a soaring sound, the wings twisted as if shuddering in agony and they continued to grow while absorbing the surrounding moonlight.

The light vanished as the wings swallowed it all.

And wings measuring about dozen meters appeared in its place.

Atsuta stepped forward.

His slight deviation from the sync was as perfect as ever.

Intense pain was the easiest sensation to grasp.

A single pain great enough to fill the entire body was enough to take over every sense in one's body.

He now only had to attack.

It was a mock battle, his blade had a cowling over it, and both Kashima and Tsukuyomi had told him not to kill, but he would still beat the boy with the mass of metal until he could no longer fight.

"Don't hold it against me, Ryouko!" he shouted as he swung down Futsuno.

Sayama was doubled over in front of him. It almost looked like the boy was bowing to him.

It gave him a nice feeling.

All that remained was to smash Sayama's body with Futsuno.

"…"

But Sayama suddenly moved.

As Atsuta watched, the boy opened his right hand and grabbed the left side of his chest.

Before Atsuta could wonder what he was going to do, Sayama spoke.

"I have remembered my father! It is not much!" He clenched his teeth until they creaked, but he continued on. "But it is still more than you know!!"

He stood up.

He used his full strength as if breaking free of his bonds.

He relied fully on strength like a struggling child.

He wrinkled his brow and his expression twisted, but he truly faced Atsuta.

He had broken free of the Art of Walking tailored specifically to him.

How? wondered Atsuta with a frown.

"I can give myself even more pain than you can give me!" shouted Sayama. "I can do so using a past you know nothing about!"

He looked up into the sky and raised his voice.

"Everyone!"

He took a breath.

"It is time to settle this!"

As Sibyl sang on the grassy plain, she heard a voice from the direction of Susaou.

"As we use even the past to bring victory, let us begin the true negotiation."

As Ooshiro focused on firing beams, he heard Sayama over the communicator.

"Listen, everyone! Gather your will into your surname and draw the meaning of your birth from your given

name. Tonight, we ask our questions with our birthplace in hand. Are you listening!?" As Ooki worked with the others to fire Boldman, she turned toward Susaou and narrowed her eyes in a smile.

"Understanding, peace, reconciliation, and everything else will come later! We must knock some sense into those who wish for the status quo and teach them what it is like to cry out and struggle to break free of the status quo!"

As she watched wings of light develop before her, Tsukuyomi heard a single voice.

"I, Sayama Mikoto, make this announcement with my authority as Team Leviathan's representative. We will face destruction as a whole. We will not yield to any past. We will recall everything and see what lies ahead of it all. And we will remain together until the end!"

He took a breath.

"This is an order. All team members, advance on them. And make sure to bring them back even if you have to beat them into submission. Bring them back to a world of

more than just names. Force the past into these name-obsessed people's hands and kick them out of their peaceful bed!"

Before Tsukuyomi's eyes, Kazami's giant wings had finished their rise into the night sky. They pierced through the forest and the night.

Meanwhile, the water had lost its light, so gravity dragged it down.

"…!"

A single strike from the moonlight wings caused the water to burst and become a mist.

And a question arrived from the direction of Susaou.

"Where is your response?"

While bent over with her wings facing the heavens, Kazami opened her mouth.

She gave a single word in response.

Behind her, Izumo shouted the same word.

"Testament!"

Sayama heard the word testament.

It came from beyond the forest, within the forest, and from the sky.

Testament, testament, testament.

It had already gone beyond Team Leviathan. Members of 2nd-Gear had joined in.

I see, thought Sayama. *This is quite pleasant.*

He began to understand what it was they wanted.

"The only conclusion we desire is victory!" he shouted before taking action.

Pain still filled his body, but he could move while driving away the pain.

As Futsuno flew in before his eyes, he jumped backwards.

He poured all his strength into this evasive leap.

And once his feet hit the ground…

"!"

He threw his body forward.

As he leaped, he drew and struck with his sword.

The silver line raced toward Atsuta.

"…!"

After swinging Futsuno down to the ground, the man swept it upwards.

He intercepted the strike from below.

But he did not make it in time. He had tried to cut the blade, but deflecting it upwards was the most he could manage.

The blade with a Low-Gear name struck the blade with a 2nd-Gear name and a metallic noise rang out.

Sparks flew and illuminated the two sword wielders.

Atsuta then moved back.

He created a gap of five meters. At that comfortable distance, he prepared his stance once more.

Meanwhile, Sayama remained in the stance he had landed in. He clicked his tongue once as he watched Atsuta.

He had failed to defeat the man.

…If I do not get an attack in soon…

The pain in his chest was taking over his body now that he had stopped moving.

The pain he had used to break the bonds of the Art of Walking was becoming a new set of chains.

Atsuta no longer spoke. Nor did he move forward.

He held Futsuno up in both hands.

"…!"

And he suddenly swung it down.

He was using Futsuno's cutting ability to cut through everything in range of the sword's pressure.

"This is a shameful method for a sword god, but it's the only way to ensure victory!"

The blade sliced through the air and stabbed into the ground.

With a roar of the ground being struck, a change occurred.

A shimmering appeared from Futsuno to a few hundred meters behind Sayama.

This was the advanced notice of Futsuno's explosive strength. It was the initial stage of the blade slicing through everything.

"Go, Futsuno! Use your slicing blade to cut through Mikoto!! Cut through his life!!"

An instant later, Sayama saw the explosion of the sword god's strength.

A bursting sound reached him.

But he also heard a voice amid it all.

“Sayama-kun!”

It was Shinjou’s voice.

Shinjou moved within the shimmering.

She suddenly remembered when she had first met Sayama.

When faced with the werewolf, she had been unable to do anything and it had put him in danger.

…How long will I be dragging him down?

She felt this was something she would never be able to forget. And if she did forget it…

…I wouldn’t be able to save him.

She asked herself what she should do now.

She knew the answer.

And so gave voice to her words of self-understanding. She spoke so she could hear it.

"Concepts of 2nd-Gear! Earth, air, and sky that provide power to names!"

She held up the staff resting on her shoulder and faced forward. She faced Sayama's back.

His back remained motionless as if waiting for her words, so she spoke.

"In accordance with my name, I reject the cutting power that is trying to cut through Sayama Mikoto!"

Accept it, she thought. *You are no longer Sadame or Setsu. Accept your true name once more.*

"My name, Sadagiri, does not cut away life," she shouted. "It cuts away the bonds of destiny, freeing life!"

As she spoke, she pressed the trigger button.

A light appeared.

It was a straight beam of light that possessed seemingly unending force.

The light was fired from Ex-St as it rested on her shoulder. That was the cannon with the name Tiger Star.

“…!”

With a metal roar, the recoil knocked Shinjou backwards and a clear noise rang out.

The front portion of Ex-St broke.

In response to its master’s will, the machine readily destroyed itself.

With the sound of a metallic explosion, Shinjou’s body was blown backwards.

But the light flew forward.

The white light formed an arc and struck Futsuno’s cutting power head on.

As the light crushed each consecutive slice, it produced a sound resembling a bombing.

A clear sound and a deep sound struck the air.

The light continued forward.

As the cutting power attempted to expand over a wider area, the light kept it in its compressed form, broke through it, and continued on.

And the light struck Futsuno.

A high-pitched noise reverberated through the air and Futsuno flew through the sky.

The blade that symbolized 2nd-Gear's current form slowly, slowly rotated as it flew up into the sky.

In the forest river, Tsukuyomi saw Kazami disappear.

No, she had not disappeared. She had flown.

In just an instant, she had flown up into the heavens.

Tsukuyomi looked up into the sky.

Two wings were visible in the night sky which was filled with named stars.

They were moonlight wings. They beat the sky and seemed to bounce back toward her.

Tsukuyomi looked at the wings flying directly toward her and the spear travelling with them.

“Testament, hm?”

She smiled.

As she realized that expression contained no hesitation or error, she aimed her large bow into the sky.

She aimed overhead, past the approaching wings and spear.

She targeted the orb with her name and released the bowstring from her bloody fingertips.

After a bursting, high-pitched noise filled the night sky , the one bearing the conclusion flew down.

Kashima saw one object in the sky.

Floating in the moonlit night sky was a falling and rotating sword.

As he observed its shape, he noticed something about the cowling covering the blade.

…It's gone.

The shot from the girl named Shinjou had knocked the cowling away, leaving the steel-colored blade exposed.

He watched the curve of that metal arc reflect the moonlight.

…This is dangerous. It could bounce off the ground and hit someone.

He was from a military god family, so he was used to handling dangerous things.

With that in mind, he reached his hand out overhead. The sword fell into his open right hand.

The chill, weight, and reliability of steel entered his hand all at once.

"Oops," he said as he dropped his laptop.

The laptop bounced off the weeds once and the LCD monitor faced him.

For an instant, he could not decide whether to prioritize the sword to the right or the laptop to the left.

A window opened on the laptop screen.

The shock of the fall must have hit the mouse button.

And something appeared on the screen.

"A video…"

It showed his home on a sunny day. In front of the doll stand in the yard, a woman held a baby.

The camera was zoomed in on the child, but the child did not understand what was before her.

She merely faced the camera.

And as she faced the camera and everything behind it, she smiled and spoke.

The speakers were not activated, so he could not hear her voice.

But he could read the child's lips and he had seen the video countless times before.

He knew exactly what she was saying. The baby had said the following.

"Ah."

And then she had opened her mouth again.

"Ah."

She repeated herself.

What had she meant by "ah, ah"?

The camera pulled back and showed the woman holding the child.

The woman's short hair shook and she gave a surprised look.

But then she formed a smile and opened her mouth.

Kashima remembered what she had said as well.

"Do you think she meant 'papa'?"

He tried to remember what he had said.

…She might have said 'mama'.

That might have been it. But it might not have. He may have been beautifying the important parts.

He smiled bitterly and looked at Futsuno in his right hand.

…I can't feel Futsuno's weight.

As he wondered why, he realized he did not need to ask why.

"I am a man of 2nd-Gear and I have remembered my power as one. …That is why."

He nodded.

"The surname Kashima indicates a military god."

He gathered strength in his right hand and looked down.

In the laptop window, the woman faced the camera and waved while still holding the baby. She waved with her left hand which lacked two fingers.

The video ended and the window closed.

Kashima faced forward and saw Atsuta looking his way as he stood empty-handed on the weed-covered clearing.

“Are you done with the family videos? Then go deal with them.”

Atsuta used his chin to point to the right.

Two people stood in that direction.

Sayama and Shinjou.

They stood next to each other, but Sayama had drawn the sword at his waist.

And so Kashima asked a question in a carefree and inviting tone.

"Shall we go settle this?"

He held up Futsuno and pointed the tip toward Sayama.

Shinjou looked at Sayama with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

Kashima read the emotion there and understood their connection.

And so he spoke.

"Susanoo slays the serpent and marries the princess. Is that it?"

"It is too soon for that. Eight dragons still await after this. The marriage will have to wait a while."

Sayama's comment caused Shinjou to blush.

She then seemed to realize something, so she faced the sword in Sayama's hand.

"Sayama-kun, can I see that sword for a moment?"

"What is it?"

"Just a protective charm."

She held the sword and slowly cut off a tuft of her hair .

She let out a breath and held the hair.

"Sorry if you find this creepy, but this is a type of good luck charm, right?"

She then lightly tied the hair to the sword and Sayama's left hand.

Kashima interpreted it as a type of shimenawa.

"That should suffice," he said. "The hair of someone with the name Sadagiri should give the sword the protection of that name."

It would be difficult to cut through it even with Futsuno.

Sayama gave a testing swing of the sword and faced Kashima.

"I would like to keep Shinjou-kun by my side during this battle. Would that be acceptable?"

"Go right ahead."

Right now, he always had his wife and child with him in a way.

"But if something happens to her, the responsibility lies with you."

"Of course. And as long as it is Shinjou-kun, even a corpse is fine by me."

Sayama then asked him a question.

"What about you?"

"I don't think I'd like that…"

"Heh heh heh. Then I win this round. Rejoice, Shinjou-kun! …What is with that look?"

"D-don't say you win if I die!"

What a strange Susanoo and princess, thought Kashima with a bitter smile. *I wonder how strange a Yamato Takeru and princess we are?*

But he erased his own smile and held up Futsuno.

He was from a military god family. The sword he held would tell him how to wield it.

In his hands, the almost perfectly tuned Futsuno would be a powerful weapon indeed.

“Let’s begin, bearer of the Leviathan Road. Let’s walk down the road of battle that leads to the conclusion.”

“Yes, I shall take Totsuka and answer Yamata’s question.”

“Can you do it?” asked Kashima. “If so, then decide what lies ahead once we break free of the status quo. Is it Low-Gear or 2nd-Gear? Is it the truth or lies? Or…is it something else entirely!?”

Chapter 30: Place of Yearning

Chapter 30

“Place of Yearning”

The past is heard and seen
The present is felt
Then can nothing be done about the future?

The past is heard and seen.

The present is felt.

Then can nothing be done about the future?

On the grassy field that had been the first battlefield, Team Leviathan and 2nd-Gear ended their battle which had developed into individual versus individual.

At the center of them all, Sibyl stopped singing and looked up.

She wiped sweat from her forehead.

"A noise?"

She frowned and tilted her head as she looked past the forest to the north.

There she saw the five hundred meter giant named Susaou.

A loud noise had just come from there.

It had been a metallic noise.

The deep noise had reverberated in her stomach and it repeated again and again.

The noise showed no sign of stopping.

In front of the lake from which the metallic noises came, two new people stood in the clearing Sayama and the others had previously fought in.

They were Izumo and Kazami.

Kazami held V-Sw and G-Sp2 in her arms and Tsukuyomi's Heavenly Moon Bow over her shoulder.

G-Sp2's console displayed a few words.

"Very strong."

"You shouldn't say that to a girl."

With that annoyed comment, she looked to the right where Izumo carried someone on his back.

It was Tsukuyomi. As she rested her chin on his head, Kazami spoke to her.

“Director Tsukuyomi, hurting your back is pretty lame.”

“I have a slim waist. I’m not like you modern athletic girls. And more importantly…”

Tsukuyomi looked toward the pier built out over the lake.

A man sat cross-legged on the weeds while facing a laptop.

It was Atsuta. He was tilting his head.

“What is with this card game? It’s gotta be cheating. I can’t win.”

“Atsuta, stop bragging about your stupidity and tell us what happened. Where are Kashima and the other two? What are these noises?”

“Just look. There’s no place for me there.”

He raised his hand and pointed the thumb behind him .

Toward Susaou.

Tsukuyomi frowned at the giant form standing in the darkness below the moon.

“Are you saying these metallic noises are what I think they are?”

“That’s right. They’re literally having a final battle at the peak.”

Atsuta twisted his head around to look behind him.

At the same time, something like white mist burst out from the stomach portion of Susaou.

Kazami knew what it was.

“That’s the steam explosion from an object moving at high speed.”

It was followed by a metallic noise. It reverberated in their guts and sounded like something breaking.

And the battle continued.

As Kashima continued the clash of metal, he moved further and further up the giant mass of metal.

He climbed Susaou.

A zigzagging staircase was built into the side of the giant parts making up its 500 meter form.

The metal staircase was about a meter wide. The corrosion from the past made his footing unreliable.

“But that is a meaningless obstacle for a military god and the one fighting him.”

As he spoke, he looked down the stairs at the boy pursuing him.

In his pursuit, the boy ran, kicked off the ground, and even dashed across the railing. All the while, he battled using the sword in his hand.

Kashima felt he was an excellent opponent.

Kashima himself knew almost nothing about wielding a sword, but the sword taught him everything he needed to know.

As a military god, a sword was something like a servant. It would teach its bearer how to use its power. It provided him knowledge, experience, and technique.

He could fight.

As he stepped, he felt the metal below his feet.

His own body fought his enemy amid the wind.

Everything rang out like music and moved like dance.

As he ran further and further up, his vision grew higher and higher.

They had already arrived at Susaou's chest.

Another hundred meters and they would be at the bridge in the head.

They were close.

And the closer he came, the faster his pulse grew.

The feeling that had once made him tremble now felt wonderful.

…I yearn to reach that place!

He swung Futsuno.

He swung the blade into the air to catch a strike from above.

The two blades clashed and a metallic noise rang out.

Sparks flew and a pleasantly hard impact reached his hand.

A roar filled his ears for an instant and white smoke exploded from the path his blade had taken.

How fast were they moving? He did not know and he did not care to know.

He merely continued upwards.

The next thing he knew, his vision was even higher.

From his position approximately four hundred meters up, he could see the moon, the bluish-black sky, and the landscape spread out below.

“So this is Tokyo at night.”

The gathering of lights to the east was the city center.

Those lights had once been lost during World War Two.

Bu he did not know much about that.

He only knew the stories about the Concept War that his grandfather had told him.

He smiled bitterly.

Still smiling, he moved his gaze westward.

He saw more lights in the night.

The lights of Tokyo drew a line from Nakano, Mitaka, Kokubunji, and to Tachikawa where he was.

The lights continued to shrink in number as they went further west.

The city lights continued to Haijima, Oume, and then to the mountains of Okutama.

Natsu and his family were in Okutama beyond the mountains.

Kashima wondered what they were doing.

They would never imagine he was fighting in a place like this.

…I will always lie to them like this.

He was sure he would never tell them the truth.

He would continue lying by never telling them about today's battle, the things which had come before, and the things that would come after, but he gained something from it.

"Isn't that right?"

With that unintentional question to his enemy, he swung Futsuno.

The enemy caught the metallic reverberation and Kashima felt the impact in his hand.

The vibration reached his head as he thought.

…What ending do I want?

He was no longer 2nd-Gear or Low-Gear. He was in an uncertain state.

Could he receive an answer while lying in an attempt to gain both?

…What if I don't get an answer?

He asked himself the question he could not ask.

But he threw the question at himself and muttered his newest answer.

"That would be fine too."

A certain woman and a certain baby appeared in his heart.

He could not believe his thoughts were on them in the middle of this crucial battle.

…I want to see you.

He thought.

…I want to see you, Natsu-san, Harumi. My family.

"Yes."

He nodded while looking to the western lights where that family was.

He would return.

Once this battle was over, he would return.

…But not to 2nd-Gear or Low-Gear or anything like that.

He would return to where they were.

When he returned the next morning, he was sure to be starving.

He wondered if Natsu would cook him breakfast at his parents' house.

She could make freshly cooked rice and miso soup, but his parents would not have any fish. In that case, she

could cook eggs and vegetables. The boiled bamboo shoots wrapped in cured ham from before had been quite good.

…Ahh, that sounds wonderful.

When he returned home, that would be waiting for him.

As the swords clashed and sent out metallic noises, Kashima thought.

…Natsu-san, Harumi. I will make sure to return to you. And then we can eat a meal together.

But there was something he had to say first. That phrase would act as the proof that he had returned to his proper place.

It was a simple phrase rather than a name and he needed to say it.

He needed to say “I’m home”.

“Yes.”

…I will return so I can say that phrase, so wait for me. Wait for your lying husband, my lying wife and our child. I will not return to any group or any Gear. I will return to you.

"I will make sure of it!"

As the guest, Natsu felt closing the porch storm shutters was her duty.

There were eight of them and they were hard to close. By the time she had finished closing them all, she had worked up a slight sweat.

After closing the last one, she stuck the wooden key in the eaves and glanced at her left hand.

That hand was missing the little and ring fingers. She always lacked some strength when closing the storm shutters.

She sighed just as Kashima's mother called out to her from behind.

"Thank you, Natsu-san. I kind of wish you could stay here forever."

"I would like that too, but Akio-san would never agree ."

"He's an idiot, but he does have his pride." She smiled bitterly. "But tell him we'll hire him if he's fired. The farm is shorthanded and short an heir."

She prepared three floor cushions in the living room bordering the porch. Three cups of tea had already been prepared.

After Natsu thanked her and sat, Kashima's mother sat on one of the other two cushions.

Kashima's father then appeared from the hallway wearing a yukata.

"Is Haru-chan asleep?" she asked him.

"Yeah, she is, she is. I've always been an expert at getting kids to go to sleep. With Aki, I'd always squeeze this part of his neck and…"

"Quiet down, old man. Just sit down."

He obediently followed his wife's instructions.

He lowered his shoulders and trembled as he sat politely next to her.

"Do you know why I called you here?'

"B-because you were lonely?"

"No."

Natsu realized Kashima's mother was looking at her.

The old couple then sighed in unison and corrected their posture.

"Once again, we must ask you to please take care of Kashima Akio."

They placed their hands in front of them in a sitting bow.

Natsu frantically reached out her hand.

"U-um, please stop that. I, uh, would also like to…"

She placed her own hands forward and lowered her head as if starting a competition over who could bow lower.

After ten seconds like that, all three of them sat up.

The edges of Natsu's eyebrows were lowered.

"What is this about?"

"We can do this as many times as we have to. Aki said he was going to take his work seriously, so he will probably end up neglecting you a bit," said his mother. " Also, he will probably lie to you about a lot, so we would like you to…"

"You don't need to ask me to forgive him for that," said Natsu. Her expression had calmed and she brought a hand to her chest. "I lie to him about a lot too."

"Like your cooking?"

"Not just that, father. Girls have plenty of lies boys don't know about."

"I don't like the sound of that."

He laughed and Natsu nodded.

"And I have been telling him one very major lie."

"Eh?"

"One rainy night while riding a bus on a road down below here, I was caught in a landslide, remember?"

Kashima's parents exchanged a glance.

"Th-that's true," said his father with a troubled look. " You were on your way to investigate some ruins up above, right?"

"Yes, that. …Well, the lie I mentioned is old enough now that I can tell you. On the night of that accident eight years ago…"

She lowered her head a bit and looked away from them.

"I was not actually on my way to the ruins."

"…"

She looked up to meet their silent gazes.

"I told my parents I was going to the ruins, but I actually intended to come here. Since graduating, I had exchanged letters with Akio-san, but I still wondered how he was doing… I planned to visit him at night, have him see me home, and…"

As she spoke, she could tell her cheeks were growing redder and redder.

"Thinking back, it was incredibly improper."

"No, um…"

"And after the accident, I was shocked when the person who saved me was the person I wanted to see most of all." She nodded and spoke quietly. "Everyone thought I was in an accident on the way to the ruins and he ended up helping me with my rehabilitation. And then he asked me to marry him."

She lowered her head again.

"So I was scared."

"…"

"I was on my way here with such improper plans and the accident felt like punishment for that, but he stayed with me without knowing or asking about the truth." She took a breath. "I am not the type of woman he thinks I am. I know nothing of the world, I am always pretending to know what I am doing, and I have indecent thoughts. And yet he married me."

She wrapped the fingers of her left hand in her right hand.

"And for some reason, I became afraid to ask him why he married me."

She took a breath and found Kashima's parents were looking directly at her.

"Ah." She frantically separated her hands and waved them back and forth. "U-um, that is no longer the case. I can only talk about it because I've gotten over it."

"Have you? But…"

"Yes, I am fine now. I got over it as soon as Haru-chan was formed inside me. It may be unfair, but having a child made me feel like there was something other than pity and responsibility between us."

She gave a bitter smile.

"And if you didn't care for someone, you wouldn't video tape the child you had with her and you wouldn't make sure to come home every day, would you? And I realized something. Every time he comes home, he makes sure to tell me 'I'm home', and when we eat, he makes sure to thank me for the meal. He had always done this, but I had never been watching closely enough. "

"I guess even Aki can come in handy sometimes."

"Oh, but I refused to talk to him for three days when he bought the video camera without asking."

Her smile lost its bitterness and she stretched her back.

"In the beginning, it may have been a lie and it may have been real, but now Akio-san, Haru-chan, and I are a real family."

"Yes," said Kashima's mother with a nod and a slight smile. "You put a lot of effort into this, didn't you?"

"No." Natsu shook her head. "It was Akio-san who put in all the effort. So I need to return all the effort he put towards us. It may be lonely when he isn't around, but Haru-chan will be our support from now on. We will be okay."

As she spoke, Natsu held the three fingers of her left hand with her right hand.

And she slowly placed her hands in front of her and bowed deeply.

But when she spoke, it was with a solid tone.

"As Takagi Natsu and now Kashima Natsu, I ask that you take care of Akio-san, Harumi-san, and myself."

The battle reached the top of Susaou.

The remains of the bridge formed a clearing of scorched metal.

The fifteen square meter space dimly reflected the moonlight.

A silhouette stood in the center like a gravestone.

It was a large sword made by intertwining many thin panels of metal.

It was at least two meters long and stabbed into the metal floor such that it stood up vertically toward the sky .

Two figures rushed into the remains of the bridge and another arrived after a short delay.

The first two were Sayama and Kashima. The following one was Shinjou.

Kashima leaped to the center of the bridge and in front of Totsuka.

But he did not reach for the sword that would mean his victory.

That was no longer his condition for victory, so he continued to hold up Futsuno.

"Come, one who will control the dragon!"

"Gladly," replied Sayama.

He ran forward and threw his body to the right as a feint.

The wind wrapped around him as he dashed and leaped. His movements were those of someone who had been freed from what bound him.

He was fast.

But Kashima could see something else.

To use his full strength on Futsuno, he had twisted his body backwards.

In the next instant, Kashima swung Futsuno's blade to the position he predicted Sayama would be.

"Ohhh!"

The military god descendent poured all his focus into slicing.

And in that instant, Sayama demonstrated a certain technique as he looked Kashima directly in the eye: the Art of Walking.

"…!?"

Kashima saw Sayama suddenly vanish.

…He learned how to do it!?

After exchanging sword blows and synchronizing their breathing through their actions, looking him in the eye was enough to achieve some level of overall synchronization.

And his enemy had done exactly that in the very, very end.

"So Low-Gear will use a 2nd-Gear technique to win!?"

This was interesting. Kashima felt joy.

Yes, he thought. *This is nice.*

He understood just how intent Sayama was on winning. The boy was even willing to use 2nd-Gear's techniques.

When it came to winning, the distinction between Low-Gear and 2nd-Gear did not matter.

And so Kashima could not stop the sword he swung down.

Sayama was no longer in the path of the blade. Outside of Kashima's perception, he had likely come to a quick stop and would attack from a different position in the next instant.

Kashima needed to see through this Art of Walking.

And to do that, he had to force himself out of sync.

Before, Sayama had done so by recalling his own past even further.

In that case, what could Kashima do?

"I…"

His vision brought him the answer.

Beyond the night sky, the mountains of Okutama were visible to the west.

…That's right. There are people waiting for me.

He had somewhere to return to.

As he realized that, he stopped yearning for that place. He instead accepted it.

He was not fighting in order to win, to kill, or to lose something.

"I am fighting to return there!"

Immediately afterwards, he felt a weight in his hand.

He felt the weight of metal, the weight of a blade, and the weight of the slicing wind.

It was only for an instant, but his thoughts for that which was important to him made him something other than a military god.

It truly did only last an instant, but that instant was enough.

Freed from the bonds of a military god, he left Sayama's synchronization.

And thus he broke through the boy's Art of Walking.

Sayama was only a step to the left.

He held his sword down by his waist in order to launch the final attack toward Kashima.

He was likely planning to attack the instant Kashima slammed Futsuno's blade into the floor.

That was when it should have ended.

But Kashima made an instant decision.

As he swung the blade down, he removed his right hand from the hilt.

And…

"Ohh!"

He poured all his strength into his right fist and struck the right side of Futsuno.

His fist broke in an instant and a dull impact passed through the back of his neck and to his brain.

But he did not care.

He had successfully altered the path of the giant blade.

Futsuno was now headed toward Sayama.

It would enter through the top of his head and leave through his left waist.

"…!"

And Sayama reacted.

He swung the sword at his waist and struck the great mass swinging down from above.

But it was no use. Kashima's strike had been different from before. It had the initial velocity of a military god and it had been made with proper footing. It was not a blow meant to be supported with only his left arm.

It demonstrated its strength in an instant.

Before the strike reached Sayama's blade, the hair wrapped around the blade and his arm was destroyed. The princess's protection which had been protecting him bent for an instant and ultimately broke.

As the hair scattered through the air, the two blades clashed.

"Sayama-kun!"

Kashima heard the girl's scream, but it changed nothing.

Sayama's blade suddenly broke.

It produced a great metallic noise.

Futsuno's slicing speed did not drop, but Sayama had no means of defending.

And Kashima had no way of stopping it either.

"Is this…!" he shouted. "Is this your answer!?"

As he heard his own voice fill the air, Kashima saw something.

He saw the answer.

First, he heard a new metallic noise.

“Futsuno…”

It broke.

“!”

The massive piece of cutting metal broke. That blade had made him question everything eight years before, but now it shattered as if it were made of sand.

It cracked and then could not withstand its downward motion.

The cutting blade broke and scattered as if embracing the air.

“What…!?”

Before Kashima could ask further questions, he saw it.

Sayama held something up in his right hand.

It was a single black floppy disk.

“This is the collection of names belonging to the countless gods of 2nd-Gear that can be said to be 2nd-Gear itself. Futsuno was created as a symbol of 2nd-Gear, so it cannot cut it!”

As he clenched the remaining hilt of Futsuno, Kashima listened to the boy speak.

“This is the proof that you truly created something of 2nd-Gear!”

Sayama moved.

He spun around, showing his back, jumped, and performed a reverse roundhouse kick on his way up.

It struck.

“…!”

A dull sound filled Kashima’s chest and he was knocked backwards.

But…

“This isn’t over yet!”

“Agreed!” shouted Sayama.

The two of them smiled at the same moment.

Kashima spread his arms, brushed away the shards of Futsuno scattered throughout the air, and stepped strongly on the metal floor.

He let out a breath, ignored the pain in his chest, and continued forward.

“Bearer of the dragon! The descendent of those who could not subdue the dragon has a question for you!”

Totsuka lay before his eyes.

That 2nd-Gear sword had been made by his grandfather. He still did not know what answer should come from it.

He reached out his broken right hand and grabbed Totsuka.

And in that instant, he saw an animal poke its head out from the breast pocket of Sayama's armored uniform.

It was Baku.

Sayama saw the past.

He was inside a metal room covered with a low ceiling . It resembled the bridge of a ship.

In the center was a platform that looked like it was meant to contain a humanoid object.

But it was currently empty and there were only two people on that bridge.

A scarlet light from the window illuminated the two of them.

Massive flames were visible immediately outside the window.

The flames burst upwards, flickered back and forth, and boiled upwards once more. However, those flames were not formless.

They took the form of a giant dragon. An eight-headed dragon.

Giant arms could be seen extending out from either side of the bridge and they were wrapped around the flames.

The two people inside the bridge were speaking. The tall one in a work uniform held a large sword in his right arm.

The other was short and wore white Japanese-style work clothes. He had been continually shouting.

They were Ooshiro Hiromasa and the grandfather of the current Kashima.

This Kashima was urging the other man to evacuate.

As he spoke, the scarlet light outside grew stronger. In response, the blue stones hanging from their necks began to emit light. As that blue light gradually grew stronger, it illuminated the two of them.

Hiromasa smiled toward Kashima amid that light.

"I can't. Now that Mikage has been removed, someone has to manually operate Susaou. And we need someone to give the answer to seal Yamata in Totsuka."

"But…!"

Hiromasa shook his head.

He removed his glasses and threw them to the floor.

Before even hitting the floor, the glasses suddenly melted.

"Now, go. It's getting so hot I'm not sure the philosopher's stone protection will be enough. You might not be able to escape safely, Kashima."

He looked directly at the short elderly man named Kashima.

Kashima gulped when he saw his eyes.

Hiromasa's eyes were not focusing and they held no light.

"Can you tell? I was blinded by the destruction of your Gear and that firebombing."

"…"

"Go gather all the others. That's what you promised, isn't it? To gather together Low-Gear and 2nd-Gear, you acted as the representative of 2nd-Gear and initially harshly rejected us. But you said you would convince the opposition to surrender to Low-Gear once Yamata is sealed. You said you would lead everyone in my place."

"You're a fool."

"Perhaps, but I've made my decision. I made it when I failed to save your Gear and you shouted at me in protest upon setting foot in Low-Gear."

He smiled.

"That was effective. I needed to be told I had no real intention of facing 2nd-Gear's destruction."

"I-I'm the one that needed to be told that."

"We're the same, Kashima. We're both engineers."

Hiromasa nodded and turned his unseeing eyes toward the window.

The eight simultaneous roars of the flame dragon stabbed into the night sky and shook the bridge.

They were cries of protest and an attempt to take vengeance against everything, but they were also suppressed and struggling cries.

However, Hiromasa could not see the dragon. His unfocused eyes looked beyond the dragon and beyond the walls of the concept space. They looked toward the small nightscape visible in the distance.

“Can you see it, Kashima? Tokyo has not even begun to recover, but you can see some lights that still live on, can’t you?”

After his question, he opened his mouth again.

“…”

But he stopped. He took a breath to calm himself before speaking again.

"Susaou isn't enough to control Yamata. I will use your Totsuka to answer Yamata's question."

"Y-you idiot!! Do you know what the answer is!?"

"Yes." Hiromasa nodded and held up the large sword in his right hand. "As I am now, there's no way I don't."

Kashima tried to say something in response.

He opened his mouth, twisted his face, and tried to draw up the words from deep in his gut.

"I… I don't actually…!"

But Hiromasa cut him off.

"Go, Kashima. This is my first command to you, military god and swordsmith."

Susaou shook as if in response to those words.

The dragon raged and tried to escape its bonds.

The bridge tilted, the metal creaked, and Kashima toppled over.

The tilting threw him into the air and he slammed into the door.

“!?”

The door suddenly opened, swallowed him whole, and closed once more.

Hiromasa had controlled the door from where he was pressed against the front of the bridge.

But he had heard Kashima as he disappeared beyond the door. His crying face had been turned toward Hiromasa.

“_____!”

The man’s shout had been a question. He was relaying the dragon’s will. He was asking the question that only he could ask.

As he left, Kashima had left everything with Hiromasa .

The bridge reverted to its normal position and Yamata roared in response to Kashima’s voice.

But Hiromasa's hands suddenly stopped on the console.

He firmly grasped the edge of the box attached to the front of the console.

After a moment, he tilted his head slightly and opened the box.

And he pulled out a single sheet of Japanese paper.

The paper had been made heat-resistant and it had large letters written in ink.

Hiromasa could not see, but he let Yamata's scarlet light illuminate the paper as he traced his fingers across it. He must have been able to feel the ink on the paper because he smiled as he touched it.

As he felt the writing, he spoke the sloppily-written katakana aloud.

"O-o-shi-ro…"

His smile deepened, he folded up the paper, and he placed it in his work uniform's breast pocket.

He then faced forward and cast his unseeing gaze toward Yamata.

"Your handwriting is terrible," he muttered just as scarlet light filled the bridge.

And just Hiromasa opened his mouth to speak the answer, the past came to an end.

The UCAT members deployed by the lakeside saw light overhead.

The light came from names quickly spreading out like a diagram of the celestial sphere.

The names were formed by tiny strings of writing which flowed from the bridge to the night sky while trailing white and blue light.

The names extended in straight lines, drew arcs through the sky in parallel lines like sheet music, surrounded the sky, and rotated around in countless layers.

They moved quickly into the distance and spread out. Differences in speed caused the white and blue names to form multiple layers. Some flew in elliptical orbit while some flew in perfect circles. Ultimately, a giant celestial sphere formed a cage in the sky.

Those names were Totsuka's true form and they were meant to seal Yamata.

Everyone heard small metallic noises amid the rapidly expanding names.

An old man from 2nd-Gear muttered to himself when he heard them.

"The metal shards forming Totsuka are expanding the names carved into them…"

The light raced on as if agreeing.

And once the celestial sphere reached the limits of the concept space, something else arrived.

First, the color crimson appeared in the empty space below the moon.

As if spilling into the air, the crimson color expanded and formed flames.

The flames flowed. They moved like water, like a serpent, like a dragon.

The fire finally truly became a dragon.

“Here it comes!” shouted someone just as it took form.

With a roar, an eight-headed, eight-tailed flame dragon appeared.

In an instant, it grew over a kilometer in length and further expanded in the very top of the concept space.

A giant red flower bloomed in the sky.

As the crimson dragon blossomed, it produced a cry. Its cry of protest shook the air and the ground.

“————!”

Its roar rang out, its scorching noise filled the air, and the celestial sphere of names…

“It’s creaking!?”

Yamata's motion caused the countless names of the seal to cry out.

"Hurry," muttered someone as they heard what sounded like the strained creaking of a ship.

"Please hurry! If Yamata is freed, this concept space might not be able to contain it!"

That shout came from the development department managers who had joined Tsukuyomi. They were the ones who had the most knowledge of Yamata's seal.

But the flame dragon in the night sky ignored them.

It raised its eight heads.

"_____!"

Eight bestial voices reverberated toward the moon.

And then Yamata moved.

It dropped down toward the iron giant on the lake approximately 1500 meters below. It descended toward that giant that spread its arms as if in an embrace.

With its opened maws in the lead, the flame dragon came to devour the blade that had once sealed it.

Chapter 31: Will of the Dragon of Water Droplets

Chapter 31

“Will of the Dragon of Water Droplets”

The dragon’s cry is a question to both heaven and earth
If one is to answer, there is no need to look up
A response is a type of attack

The dragon's cry is a question to both heaven and earth

If one is to answer, there is no need to look up

A response is a type of attack

The instant he awoke from the past, Kashima realized he had just seen what he had always wanted.

Totsuka changed form in his right hand. The metal fragments forming the sword, those metal fragments engraved with names, expanded like a blooming flower. As a whole, they formed a helix.

Meanwhile, his left hand pulled a single piece of Japanese paper from his breast pocket.

This was the paper his grandfather had written on.

He unfolded it and saw the katakana name with a large X drawn over it.

It said Ooshiro.

…It seems you had terrible handwriting, grandfather.

Kashima thought about what his grandfather had asked forgiveness for.

…It's okay, grandfather. He smiled when he saw the name you had written!

He formed the same smile he had seen in the past and attached his grandfather's paper to Totsuka.

And he immediately pulled Totsuka from the floor.

A spiral blade appeared.

He faced forward and saw Sayama standing with Shinjou.

As if in response to their gazes, a roar filled the air behind Kashima.

It came from Yamata.

Kashima could understand it. Yamata was emitting both joy and anger over feeling the outside air for the first time in sixty years.

The blazing wind approaching from the heavens showed that Yamata was dropping his eight maws and eight sets of fangs toward them.

In less than a minute, the area would be roasted and Yamata would be free.

And…

"Without Futsuno, I can't cut the heat. But can you answer Yamata's question to suppress him and then seal him in Totsuka once more?"

As Kashima held out the metal sword, Sayama responded with his actions.

He approached and grabbed Totsuka with Georgius.

…I see.

There had been no need to ask. Sayama had come here to give his answer.

Next, a girl approached Sayama's side.

And Totsuka raced within Sayama's hand.

"Give us the question, speaker of the dragon's will."

He moved to the front edge of the bridge where the melted metal formed a cliff's edge.

That windy precipice was the optimal position for striking Yamata.

Sayama and Shinjou ran over and Kashima opened his mouth as he heard their footsteps.

He spread his arms, looked into the sky, and spoke on behalf of the roar descending from the heavens.

"I…"

He spoke.

"I have a name that I cannot remember in the slightest."

His voice carried far and wide.

"I ask you! Of Yamata's two names, Kusanagi and Murakumo, which is the true name!?"

He took a breath.

"Answer this! Which is the truth of 2nd-Gear! Which is the true form of our people!?"

Sayama ran as he looked up at the flame dragon falling headlong from above.

In the heavens, he saw Yamata and the seal made from the countless names.

In UCAT's cafeteria, Kashima had said that seal had been Sayama's grandfather's idea.

That truth brought pain to his chest.

He had trouble breathing and his body threatened to stiffen up.

…But it is a truth I cannot avoid!

With that cry of his spirit, he ran toward the position from which to strike Yamata.

The eight dragon heads questioned him as he ran.

They roared.

This was the voice he had once heard in his dream. It contained anger and resentment, but it was bound by an even deeper emotion. The emotion could be heard in the sound rather than the words.

He nodded toward Yamata.

…I understand your cry. It may be conceited, but if you do not believe in yourself…

"You cannot be sincere!"

With that shout, he came to a stop.

He took his position atop the metal cliff where the wind would wash over him most strongly.

As the dragon heads approaching from above filled his vision, he shouted toward those fifty meter wide faces.

"I will give you your answer! I will give you the name that describes the entirety of your world!"

In response, Yamata opened its mouths while not lessening its speed of descent.

The dragon's roar shook the air as it asked.

What is my name? What is the world I ruled and what are the people who lived there?

And Sayama spoke Yamata's original name.

His options were Kusanagi and Murakumo, the two names of the wind.

"Kusanagi…"

But he did not stop there. Without looking away from Yamata, Sayama continued to speak.

"…and Murakumo!"

He nodded as he chose his answer.

"You are the one who possessed both names simultaneously!"

Kashima nodded when he heard Sayama's answer.

But he still asked a question despite the satisfied smile on his face.

"Are you sure that's your answer? If you're wrong…"

"Do not mock me, military god! When one with the surname Sayama speaks…his words are absolute!" Sayama's words reached him from behind. "Listen. Kusanagi is the wind of the earth that dances along with the people of the earth! On the other hand, Murakumo is the wind of heaven that people look up to with respect! They are both wind, they both continue on without end, and they both represent all things as they are formless. That is the name hated by Yamata's flames! That is the name of the sky dragon that produces water droplets! Yamata, you hold both names and your true identity is a rain dragon!"

And…

"Great dragon of 2nd-Gear, this is no mistake. That world was once ruled by the heavenly and earthly winds you created, was it not? Then, Yamata, take those two different names once more. Name yourself Kusanagi while in the land of men and Murakumo while watching over them from heaven!"

Hearing that, Kashima shouted out with a smile.

"Correct!"

And Yamata roared.

Having heard its name, the dragon agreed and understood, but the residual heat of its anger remained.

As a final test, the dragon tried to burn away the one who bore Totsuka. The same as it had done to Ooshiro Hiromasa.

But Kashima heard Sayama cry out with a smile of his own.

“Old man! That is your cue!!”

The indicated person stood alongside the lake with Izumo.

Ooshiro showed no concern about the roars and movements of the dragon overhead. He simply pulled an object out of the paper wrapping he held under his arm.

It was a glass bottle. The writing on the bottle said…

“Sacred sake. Perhaps we should name it Kashima.”

He pulled out the cork.

But instead of drinking the contents or pouring them into the lake, he tossed the bottle into the air.

As his gaze followed the swing of his arm and then the airborne bottle, he saw the night sky.

There, he saw scarlet light and the eight-headed dragon crammed into the sky within the concept space.

"After Yamata was sealed, the people of 2nd-Gear surrounded Susaou with water on their Kashima's suggestion. They did so because the great serpent in Low-Gear Japanese mythology was slain using sake."

The bottle reached the zenith of its flight.

And at that point, something shattered it from above.

It was Izumo's V-Sw after he jumped up into the air.

The cowling over V-Sw's blade had been removed and its rear thrusters were deployed in its second form.

After shattering the bottle, Izumo swung the blade of light down along with the sake.

The blade was headed toward the lake's surface.

"Old man Ooshiro, at times like this, it's okay to try to look cool."

"No need. I always look cool."

Izumo ignored him and squeezed the trigger on V-Sw's grip.

"I will do my best," said the weapon's console.

First, light erupted from the blade.

Then, the thrusters on the opposite face of the blade shot out light like a comet.

"Aaaaaahhhhhhhh!!"

The strike produced by the acceleration and his cry caused the lake surface to explode.

But it did not end there.

Izumo stood on the exposed lake bottom and struck the surrounding water from below.

He struck once in all four directions.

The roar of waterfalls surrounded him and the water around Susaou took in the sake and danced through the air.

Four pillars of water containing sacred sake with the name of a military god had been created and they blasted up toward Yamata as a counterattack.

In the center of the great waterfalls, Izumo shouted up at the dragon in the night sky.

“Izumo! That is the name of the wind that calls in the clouds and it is now the name of one who desires the dragons! Remember that!”

His words played their role.

As the pillars of water rose with great acceleration, they spiraled around each other and formed water dragons filled with sacred sake.

The four water dragons grew to several hundred meters in length.

Their roars combined into a single great roar as they danced up toward Yamata.

And the two types of dragons began their attacks. The water dragons turned to steam and Yamata had holes gouged out by water.

However…

“————!”

Yamata spread out its body in order to avoid a direct strike from the water dragons.

It spread its eight heads to either side and slipped below the water pillar dragons after only receiving a glancing blow.

But something else stopped its movements.

It was light.

Specifically, it was moonlight.

Six thick pillars of light fell from the concept space ceiling and they stopped on either side of Yamata as a cage.

The three pillars of light on either side were the color of moonlight and they restrained Yamata.

Yamata let out a cry while it was held between these pillars while already inside the celestial sphere cage.

At the same time, the sacred sake imbued water dragons reversed direction in midair and struck Yamata.

The sound of impact and the cries of flames filled the night.

The one who had manipulated the moonlight stood by the lakeside.

With Atsuta supporting her back, Tsukuyomi aimed her bow toward the sky.

“I’m sorry, Yamata. But it’s about time that you forgave us.”

"Tch. Quit trying to look good. …And why do I have my arms around an old woman's ass?"

"Shut up. And don't try to cop a feel."

"Of what? No one wants to touch your wrinkly- Ow ow! What the hell are you doing!?"

Tsukuyomi ignored Atsuta's anger and looked up into the sky. Her expression stiffened.

"Yamata is still moving."

The flame dragon had been restrained by the pillars of light and struck by the water dragons, but it raised its eight heads and gathered all its strength to accelerate downwards.

The four water dragons evaporated in an instant.

The more it was restrained, the crueler it grew. Its firepower visibly increased.

Everyone gulped and thought this was the end.

They all turned toward the remains of Susaou's bridge where two people stood.

Sayama held Totsuka low in order to strike upwards against the coming dragon. A girl pressed up against his back.

Everyone saw them there.

And someone cried out to them.

"Go!"

And they responded.

As he stood on the edge of the bridge's remains, Sayama faced Yamata.

The eight-headed flame dragon descended while struggling within its cage of light.

Even as it lost its power, it produced heat.

"…!"

Sayama trembled as prepared to swing Totsuka up toward the great roar.

But he felt something even more certain than his trembling.

He heard Shinjou's words as she pressed against his back.

"Don't worry. I will be with you no matter what happens. We can cut away any bad destiny!"

"Yes." He nodded. "Stay by my side, Shinjou-kun!"

He gathered his strength and looked up. The dragon's faces had already drawn quite close.

But Sadagiri's name alleviated the heat and light that blew down at them.

They simply had to go for it.

The dragon bared its eight sets of fangs just as Sayama swung Totsuka.

With that single slice, the blade struck the flames. In that instant, a certain change occurred.

As if responding to the strength of Shinjou clinging to him from behind, he felt a vibration in his left hand.

"…!"

It was Georgius. The medallion placed inside that gauntlet emitted a bluish-white light. That light circled around and enveloped Totsuka.

"What is this?"

Sayama did not answer Shinjou's surprised question.

If Yamata was what had been left behind by 2nd-Gear, this was what had been left behind by his mother.

Is this light Georgius's question? wondered Sayama. *Just as Yamata asks for his name, is Georgius asking something of itself?*

"It is sentimentality!" he shouted.

Despite the slight pain in his chest, he recalled a certain fact.

During his battle with Atsuta, he had dug up this moment in the past to escape the man's synchronization.

Back when his parents had been alive, had his father been the person Ryouko had said he was?

And did his mother look the same as in his memories of her?

…The answer is…

He hid the answer in his heart and completed the swing of Totsuka that would seal Yamata.

"Everyone!" he shouted.

As everyone in the concept space watched, an explosion of flames appeared in the sky.

The fire burst eight separate times at an altitude of five hundred meters and eight blasts of wind flew in separate directions afterwards.

Amid the great noise, a voice could be heard.

The voice belonged to Sayama Mikoto.

And as his name would suggest[5], his words were powerful, carried through the sky, and permeated the earth.

“Everyone! Once this battle is over, we will trust in the misunderstanding known as understanding and welcome 2nd-Gear!”

The flame dragon burst in the sky and a voice reverberated from the center.

“Everyone, listen to the voice of your neighbor. Look your neighbor in the eye. Look upon the truth of 2nd-Gear and upon the form of those who will be with you from now on. The surname of Sayama states it here: 2nd-Gear is the same as us!”

As if in response to his last statement, Yamata’s entire body burst.

“The divine sword Totsuka will take Yamata and produce Kusanagi in man and Murakumo in heaven! We will welcome them. And to the people of the ever-changing wind and of the divine sword that possesses the will of both heaven and earth, do not fear your power for we are with you!”

He paused for a moment.

“Where is your response!? Tonight is the night for a pleasant celebration!”

Countless voices rose as one in response to his question.

“Testament!”

The people’s voices joined the final bestial roar filling the sky.

It was a dragon’s cry.

The voice of the beast scattering in the fiery explosion filled the concept space.

But this cry was different from before.

It was a higher-pitched cry of joy.

As proof that the dragon had regained its form, its song raced through the sky as wind and reverberated through the high heavens.

The Concept Core was sealed inside Totsuka.

And in response, everything within the concept space changed.

First, the spray of flames covering the night sky vanished.

Next, the celestial sphere of names disappeared instantly and the wind at the center of the blast raced across the concept space.

A great wind shook the forest, blew across the rough lake surface, and climbed the walls of the concept space.

As the wind approached the peak of the concept space, it collided with itself.

The impact of air called in lightning.

And then rain arrived.

After taking in the breath of Kusanagi, the wind of the earth produced the rain of Murakumo which poured down below the moon.

The rain soaked the trees, the land, the people, and even the iron giant standing at the concept space's center.

Everyone stared at Susaou.

As the rain poured down on it, it almost seemed to be crying.

Sayama and Shinjou stood on the remains of Susaou's bridge as the rain hit it.

Sayama faced forward with Totsuka's normal form in his left hand and Shinjou to his right.

To the back of the bridge where a wall still remained, Kashima stood alone.

He simply let the rain cover him.

Sayama was equally soaked as he looked up at the man.

"Shall we head down?"

"No. I want some time to think."

"I see."

Sayama then tried to hand him Totsuka, but he raised his left hand with a rain-soaked smile.

"You can take it. It can act as evidence of everything that happened."

Sayama's only response was to nod.

He pushed Shinjou's back with his right hand and began to walk.

Shinjou brushed up her wet bangs and followed.

Now that the battle was over, the bridge seemed quite small. They arrived at the stairs in no time at all.

As they did, Sayama saw Kashima sit on the bridge's floor.

He held Futsuno's hilt after Sayama had destroyed the blade.

But Sayama said nothing.

Shinjou glanced over at him.

“Will he be okay?”

“He came here to make sure he would be.”

“Really?”

Shinjou tilted her head and then smiled bitterly when she realized she was questioning his words.

“We’re as opposite as ever.”

“That is how it must be, Shinjou-kun.”

Sayama removed his coat and placed it over Shinjou’s shoulders.

She looked troubled but did not reject it.

She merely clung to his right arm.

She was a girl at the moment and she gave a questioning expression.

“Do you mind?”

"Not at all. Feel free while a boy as well. …It is still you either way."

"I'm still normal enough that I can't quite get over that part, but…um… A lot has happened over the past few days, so…uh…"

She mouthed the words "I'm sorry", but then smiled and said something else.

"Thank you."

"…"

"Maybe I really should apologize, but thank you. I haven't said that yet, have I? I've always been apologizing."

"So will you be saying that instead now?"

"Yes. As long as I am with you, I want to say that. If I apologize, then you will only be with me because you have no choice. So…"

She nodded and let go of his arm.

On one of the staircase's landings, she held out her right hand which had a ring on it.

After thinking for a moment, Sayama suddenly moved one step down from her.

"This is my dominant hand."

He moved Totsuka to his right hand, freeing his left hand.

"Isn't this how one should take a princess's hand?"

He took her right hand as if scooping it up from below.

The ring on his left hand clinked against the one on her right hand.

After blushing and nodding, she stepped down alongside him.

The sound of her footstep was followed by more footsteps as they descended the staircase together.

They descended toward the pier and the people awaiting them beyond the pier.

As they descended, the rain gradually let up.

Soon, only the moonlight would remain overhead.

Final Chapter: That Which the Wind Conveys

Final Chapter

“That Which the Wind Conveys”

What should you say?
What should you listen to?
It is all important

End.

What should you say?

What should you listen to?

It is all important

Kashima arrived in Okutama before the first train of the morning.

After leaving the concept space in western Tachikawa, he had met up with the group handling the cleanup and had them arrange a ride to Okutama station.

He was feeling quite nimble. He still felt some pain in his healed right hand, but he felt that pain served to wake him up.

He walked through pre-sunrise Okutama on his way to his parents' house.

His parents were certain to be awake already.

This was the day they would begin planting the rice, so he had to decide whether he would help them or not.

"Either way, Natsu-san will want to help."

He gave a bitter smile and remembered all the times he had helped in the past.

…I would plant the rice with my grandfather back then.

He recalled the sensation of his feet sinking into the wet mud up to the ankles.

…Maybe I should help.

The development department would essentially be taking the day off and it was the start of May, so he could take a few days of paid vacation with just a phone call.

And once that vacation was over…

…What will things be like?

Team Leviathan would surely begin negotiating with the other Gears.

He remembered the boy and girl who had descended Susaou hand in hand.

Susanoo and his princess had chosen the windy land of Izumo. He was certain they would acquire several more Concept Cores to present to heaven. And someone needed to make the equipment and weapons that would aid them.

"That's our job."

He nodded once, hid that thought deep in his heart, and changed his focus.

…I need to hurry home.

If his parents were up, Natsu and Harumi would be as well.

Harumi had a way of crying when he was gone, so he hoped she was not causing too much of a problem.

He hurried along the sloped road leading through the forest.

He turned a sharp curve and found the site of the accident before him.

But this was not his destination. He wanted to continue up the hill and reach his parents' house.

Hurry, he thought as his legs picked up speed.

And then he spotted someone in front of the slope that he had punched the other day.

A woman in a shirt and jeans was sitting on the guardrail in front of it.

It was Natsu.

She held Harumi and her shirt buttons were loosened, exposing her right breast.

"…"

Her narrowed eyes suddenly noticed him.

"Akio-san?"

She trembled and stood up. The ring on a chain around her neck swayed.

"Akio-san."

She raised her voice and began to approach, but then she blushed with a look of realization.

She looked down and found her visible breast and Harumi's sleeping form.

Her pace slowed and her expression grew troubled. She was unsure whether to prioritize Kashima, herself, or Harumi.

Kashima approached with a bitter smile.

"Stay still."

He looked around to make sure no one was around and reached for her chest.

He touched her breast and moved her bra and nursing pad back into place.

She gave a ticklish groan and Kashima gave her a troubled look of his own.

He buttoned up her shirt and then spoke.

"Natsu-san."

"Um, yes? What is it?"

"I assume you were on an early morning walk, but what would you have done if someone other than me came along?"

"Eh? Th-then I would have taken the situation more seriously. Fortunately, I don't know anyone here."

"Then why did you panic so much when I came along?"

"Because I don't want you to think I'm indecent…"

As she blushed and narrowed her downturned eyes, he sighed.

He was unsure what to do, but she nodded toward him.

And then the two of them began walking.

"Your parents are already awake. They said we would eat after I returned from my walk."

"But I wanted to eat your cooking."

"I will prepare the extra meal."

She narrowed her eyes again and gave a pleasant laugh.

She then tilted her head.

"Are you not going to ask why I'm here?"

"If I asked, would you lie?"

"Yes. I know you will understand even if I do."

She was a very indirect wife, but her smile contained no ill will.

Kashima thought as he walked alongside her.

…And you don't ask what I've been doing. Even though you can tell something happened to my hand.

The reason she did not ask had to be the same as the one she had just mentioned.

"We are Yamata Takeru and his princess," muttered Kashima while he narrowed his eyes toward Natsu.

He wanted to tell her so very much.

About the near destruction of the city visible in the distance.

About his grandfather and his comrades ensuring the destruction they underwent did not happen again.

About his grandfather's feelings and the engineer who had responded to them.

About how he had sought power and caused an accident while pursuing her.

And about the battle that had occurred the night before.

…I want to tell her everything I saw, everything I felt, the answers I gained, the questions they brought, and everything else.

But he felt he did not have to tell her.

This was the same as Susaou.

That iron giant stood within the concept space in the city behind him. No one knew about it, but even if it was forgotten…

…The fact that he saved this world will not be lost.

Even if all of it was forgotten, it would not be lost.

"…"

Kashima used his bandaged right hand to embrace the shoulder walking alongside him.

"Nn," breathed Natsu as she brought herself close while still holding Harumi.

Suddenly, the wind blew in from behind them.

The wind came from the east. That powerful wind told them it was morning.

"The sunrise," said Natsu as the morning light appeared behind them.

In the blowing wind, she tilted her head and looked behind her.

Beyond the forest, she should have seen Tokyo's cityscape.

"Huh?" She narrowed her eyes. "For a moment, I thought I saw a giant figure in the middle of the city."

Kashima gasped, but then closed his eyes and assumed she had seen wrong.

But he still opened his mouth and chose his words carefully.

"Look carefully."

"I will." She nodded and narrowed her eyes toward the rising sun. "How strange. Tokyo is covered in a morning fog, but the sunlight makes it shine gold. It looks like something out of my father's picture books."

"Does it?" Kashima took in a breath. "Then Susanoo must be protecting that land."

"Yes," she said with a slight smile.

And the wind blew between the two of them.

The easterly wind was still cold that time of year. Not long after the rice was planted, the rainy season would arrive, shortly followed by summer.

The beautifully clear sky would soon become humid and thick.

The wind of Kusanagi that traverse the land and swept across the plants would become the wind of Murakumo that produced the rain of the rainy season.

…Well, grandfather? Is the wind of this world the same as the wind of the world you lived in?

Kashima did not know the answer, but he had a feeling he understood.

…Is that how it works?

As he watched the wind leave, he remembered something.

He remembered what he needed to say to the person he was walking with.

He decided to say the phrase which had been on his mind throughout the battle.

He nodded once.

When he turned around, Natsu was looking at him. Her head was tilted and she waited for him to speak.

He opened his mouth and spoke to her and the child sleeping in her arms.

"I'm home."

…Easterly wind, wind of Kusanagi that will eventually become Murakumo, are my words reaching you? I am no longer denying the power of 2nd-Gear that you left behind. But …

"I have returned to the two of you."

As he spoke, Natsu nodded and Harumi opened her eyes.

"Ah…ah."

Natsu smiled at the small voice.

That smile indicated something important to her and she now turned it toward Kashima.

“Akio-san.”

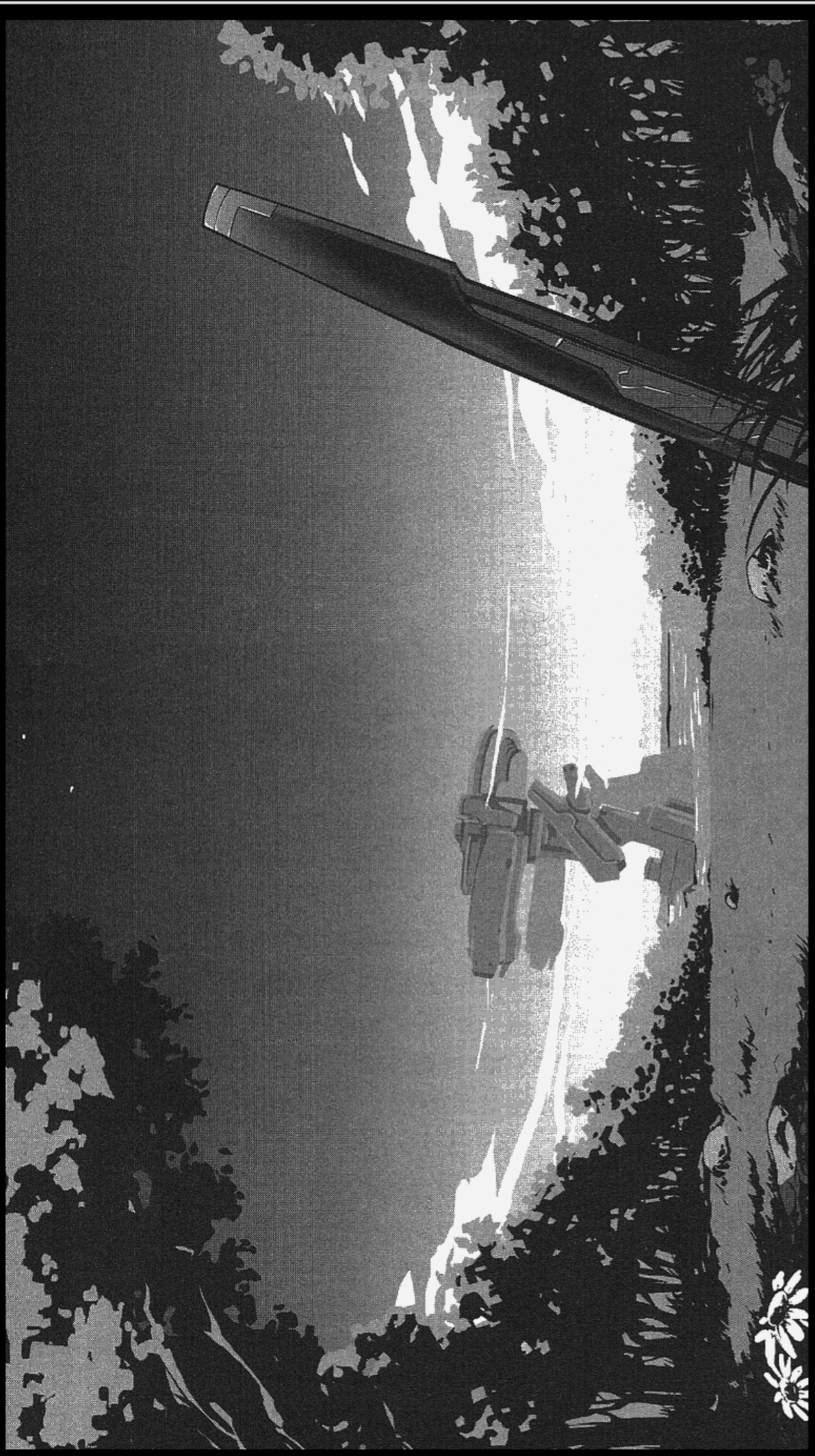
With slightly damp eyes, she followed his name with two simple words.

These precious words were the reason he yearned for the ever-changing wind that travelled everywhere.

Natsu spoke those words in her quiet yet certain voice.

And he wondered if the wind was listening to her words.

終わりのクロニクル



"Welcome home."

“Welcome home.”

Afterword

Hello. Ahead Series – Owari no Chronicle 2 <B> is complete.

Oddly enough, this one is even thicker than the last one, but I think the length will stop here. This happened because there is so much I want to write, so I thank those of you who have stuck with me.

Now for some information about the novel.

Judgments concerning the firebombing of Tokyo change a lot depending on the book you read, but I have treated it as it was represented here. I was a student during the fiftieth anniversary of the event, so I had an easy time looking up information, but I'm not sure how easy it would be now. Also, there were bombings all across Japan, so you might find that scars of the war exist beneath your feet if you look into it.

By the way, it seems my father experienced an aerial bombing while swimming in a river. According to him…

"I panicked like crazy."

Yeah, I would think so.

About the back cover, this entire Chronicle will be the first episode of Ahead, so even this second story is treated as the 1st. In that respect, it is no different from City. Thank you for understanding.

Anyway, let's get to the usual chat.

"Good morning, producer of strange statements. I am willing to listen today, so try saying something."

"You're the same as always. And when have I ever said anything strange? I demand a correction."

"Fine. I'll make a correction, so make sure not to forget it."

"Thanks. I haven't had any fish lately, so I don't have any DHA for my brain."

"You tell your cat to eat fish but don't eat any yourself ?"

"Don't tell me how to eat. Are you my wife or my mother? Anyway, we've veered way off track, so what should we do?"

"Hmm. To be blunt, did you read it?"

"I did. Once again, there wasn't much of the cat. Both halves of this story were terrible!!"

"Can I ignore that?"

"Feel free. The part about shooting beams from the hand was great."

"Have you tried it?"

"Not beams, no."

"You've tried something else!?"

"Yes. One time after waking up in high school, I did the Shoryuken in the middle of my room for some reason . The move worked perfectly, but I broke the fluorescent light on the ceiling and ended up covered in blood."

"Oh, yeah. The invincibility goes away at the top of the ascent."

"I botched the landing and fell onto the shards scattered on the floor. Then when I writhed in pain, I cut myself even more. It was horrible."

"Doubling the points with an additional attack, hm? But why did you even do that?"

"I was probably tired after studying for entrance exams. I blame Japan's educational system."

"There's definitely something wrong with an educational system that produced someone like you. And I'm getting the feeling that no one I know has any normal memories about their school days."

"I get the feeling that we're not talking about the novel at all."

"Then say something about it. Something other than the cat."

"Oh, that's a tough one."

No, it isn't. And is that really where we're ending this?

Anyway, my background music while working this time was Sada Masashi's Kanpaku Sengen (I love the lyrics).

"Who maintained their lie to the end?"

You can think on that.

Now that the groundwork has been laid, the next volume will head further out and accelerate.

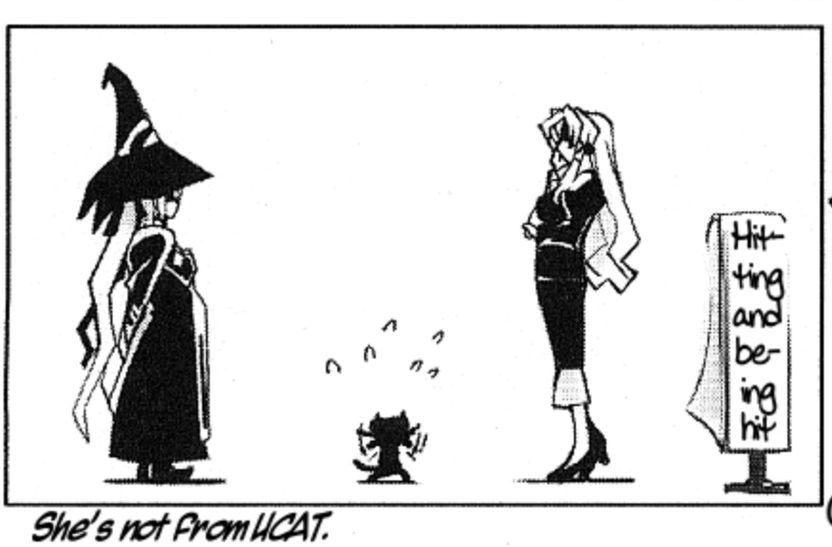
September 2003. A morning with a beautiful moon.

-Kawakami Minoru

Afterword

Omake Empire
(Tentative Title)

Satoyasu.



She's not From UCAT.

Afterword

Omake Empire (Tentative Title)

Satoyasu

Natsu: Good, good, good, good.

Panel 1 title: UCAT Comedy Championship

Panel 1 text: Wa ha ha Wa ha ha

Panel 4 sign: Hitting and being hit.

Bottom text: She’s not from UCAT.

Notes

1. ↑ 'certainly' and 'yes' are 'kanarazu' and 'shikari', the kanji of which when together are the word ' inevitable' ('hitsuzen').
2. ↑ A kanji pun that combines the name Sadame and the name Mikoto to create the word for destiny.
3. ↑ Sadagiri is a combination of the kanji for Sadame and Setsu.
4. ↑ A kanji pun. Destiny(Sadame + Mikoto) has the character for life(Mikoto) cut(Setsu) from it to make Sadagiri(Sadame + Setsu)
5. ↑ Mikoto is spelled with kanji meaning “honorable words”.